

PRESENT AND ENGAGED:

BUILDING SPIRITUAL INTEGRITY IN MISSIONAL CHURCHES

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

“I think that religion is a bunch of *bulls*---. Would I still be welcome at your church?”

Now the phone conversation had become interesting. I had called Marc because his mother had called me. After finding out that I was indeed the new pastor in town who was starting a church, she explained that she had raised her son in church, but now that he was married and on his own, he had nothing to do with God or church. His wife occasionally attended, but not Marc. Would I be willing to give him a call? Of course, I said, not feeling very optimistic about a successful outcome of a cold call. I felt like a truant officer as I explained to Marc who I was. When confronted by his opinion, I knew that I had better not blink (phone style, that is).

Should I explain to him that we were a Southern Baptist church plant and that he might have to clean up his language? Should I offer to call back sometime when he felt more positively about religion? Should I surprise him by saying something negative about religion myself?

“Absolutely,” was the first word that came out of my mouth. “You are why we exist, to give people like yourself the opportunity to discuss and consider what you think.”

That conversation marked the beginning of a friendship between Marc and me that eventually led to him becoming an active follower of Jesus. Years later, after attending seminary, Marc became a church planter himself, and to this day he challenges me to be faithful to the lessons of Christ that we both learned through his mother’s love.

We were discovering what it meant to be a church that is engaged in the mission of Christ.

THE MISSIONAL NEED

A new word has become standard in church vocabulary: *missional*. Even though Eric Reed, the managing editor of *Leadership*, reports that it was defined a hundred years ago in the Oxford English dictionary as “something of, or pertaining to, missionaries,” most computer spell checks will underline it as a misspelled word.¹ Just a few years ago, a database search would query, “*Did you mean mission, missions?*” Today, however, a Google search will bring up 631,000 hits. It is a word that is used in an attempt to recover the purpose and identity of the church. Alan J. Roxburgh writes that “a group uses new language to articulate something that is felt and needs to find expression.”² It seems that the Western world has changed from a Christendom orientation to a post-Christian mission field that requires the same apostolic approach that is necessary in any mission field in the world.

The group that launched this new language was a collection of missiologists and theologians comprising the *Gospel and Culture Network* (GOCN). They were responding to observations made in books and lectures by the late Lesslie Newbigin, a British Anglican missionary who, upon returning to England after thirty years in India, realized that his home culture had nearly lost its Christian identity. In 1998, GOCN published *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.³

¹ Eric Reed, “New Ownership,” *Leadership*, Winter 2007, 20.

² Alan J. Roxburgh, “The Missional Church,” *Theology Matters*, September/October 2004, 1.

³ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). A key book by Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969).

Roxburgh describes the quick infiltration of this word: “Almost everywhere one goes today the word *missional* or the phrase *missional church* is used to describe everything from evangelism to reorganization plans for denominations, to how to make coffee in church basements and denominational meeting rooms.”⁴ Its usage has become so broad that Roxburgh complains that within a few years it has gone “from obscurity to banality” and that “people still don’t know what it means.”⁵ Yet its most important feature stands out: a recovery of God’s purpose for the church in the world.

Regardless of potential confusion about the meaning of the word, Reggie McNeal goes so far as to say, “The rise of the missional church is the single biggest development in Christianity since the Reformation. The post-Reformation church of the modern era differed remarkably from its medieval predecessor. The missional church will just as dramatically distinguish itself from what we now call ‘church.’”⁶ It is perhaps too early to confer that level of historic significance on the missional discussion, but the church in the West has engaged key questions about the mission of the church and the work of God in the world today. The quest is to recover a New Testament impact for the church.

Three factors seem to require a recovery of God’s purpose for the church: the significant change in culture, the perceived ineffectiveness of the church, and the need for theological and spiritual renewal of the church. The most often discussed factor is the first, which has to do with sweeping social changes in culture that is moving from a modern era to a post-modern era. Prophets in the Emergent movement like Brian McLaren and Jimmy Long stress that the landscape has drastically changed and that the

⁴ Roxburgh, “Missional Church,” 2.

⁵ Roxburgh, “Missional Church,” 2.

⁶ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard of the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), xiii.

church must change with it.⁷ Long argues that the degree of social change is epic and in the Western world, on the scale of the transition from Hellenistic/Roman to Medieval, then to Enlightenment/Modern, and now to Postmodern/Emerging.⁸ McLaren is direct about the implication of this changed world: “The point is, if you have a new world, you need a new church. You have a new world.”⁹

Eddie Gibbs, senior professor in the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary and director of the Institute for the Study of Emerging Churches at the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts writes, “The economic, technological, and social changes taking place throughout Western societies are so comprehensive and traumatic that all institutions become enrolled. Churches must re-envision their ministry to become a different church than has existed before. A missional engagement is the priority for the church today.”¹⁰

Gibbs identifies five megatrends that are reshaping culture as well as the church:

1. A shift from modernity to post-modernity.
2. A shift from the Industrial to the Information Age.
3. A shift from Christendom to post-Christendom.
4. A shift from production initiatives to consumer awareness.
5. A shift from religious identity to spiritual exploration.¹¹

These changes have led to the erosion and loss of a Christian consensus, which is overwhelmingly apparent in Western Europe and increasingly apparent in urban and

⁷ Brian McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), and Jimmy Long, *Emerging Hope: Strategy for Reaching Postmodern Generations* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

⁸ Long, *Generating Hope*, 64.

⁹ McLaren, *Other Side*, 15.

¹⁰ Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchMorph: How Megatrends Are Reshaping Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 11.

¹¹ Gibbs, *ChurchMorph*, 19.

intellectual areas of the United States. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, argues that urban areas are increasingly post-Christian, requiring a missional approach. What he means by a missional approach is “adapting and reformulating absolutely everything a church does in worship, discipleship, community, and service.”¹² Such a reformulation requires absolute clarity and focus on God’s purpose for the church.

According to Gibbs, we must learn the lesson of history: “In the long term, churches will either morph or become moribund. But the process will be gradual and the picture will be confusing.”¹³ Alan Hirsch describes the Western church as being in a state of “ecclesial future shock.” “We find ourselves lost in a perplexing global jungle where our well-used cultural and theological maps don’t seem to work anymore. It seems as if we have woken up to find ourselves in contact with a strange and unexpected reality that seems to defy our usual ways of dealing with issues of the church and its mission.”¹⁴

Most of the current considerations for change have been in respect to postmodernism. The emphasis of the Emergent discussion is not as directly focused on the recovery of purpose for the church as it is on an adapted expression of that purpose. Addressing postmodernism requires peeling off some of the layers of modernism that affect the church, a process that necessitates the recovery of purpose. For instance, one change that is often discussed is a move from a more individual-oriented society in modernism to a more community-oriented society in postmodernism. Although no one

¹² Tim Keller, “The Missional Church,” Redeemer Presbyterian Church, <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/missional.pdf> (accessed April 26, 2011).

¹³ Gibbs, *ChurchMorph*, 31.

¹⁴ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 16.

argues that people are naturally less self-absorbed now, there does seem to be a difference in the way hopes and dreams are pursued. In younger generations, belonging seems to be more important than achieving. If this is true, the purpose of the church as it relates to building community and meaningful relationships becomes more critical.

The second factor that requires a recovery of the purpose of God for the church in the world has to do with an awareness that most churches are having little transformational impact on their local communities. This loss of impact certainly relates to the first factor in respect to churches not translating the Gospel well in a changing world, but it is more an indication of a loss of clear purpose. On several occasions, this writer has conducted seminars with pastors and church leaders about community impact. The seminar often begins by asking those attending to describe the expectations that their local communities have regarding the impact of their church upon the community. A brief discussion almost always indicates that the pastors and church leaders suspect that the local community has little expectation that their churches will make a significant impact. When asked what expectations their churches have about their community impact, the answer is the same: very little. Even though everyone there is committed to the Great Commission, there is little expectation of a real impact or meaningful transformation. Milfred Minatrea, the director of the Missional Church Center for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, describes churches caught in a maintenance type of ministry, with programs and activities that are satisfying to members but have little impact beyond the church. He writes that, "In pursuing the missional vision, leaders seek to rediscover that for which the church was sent in the first century."¹⁵

¹⁵ Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), xvi.

The third factor that requires a refocus of God's purpose deals with the church itself more than its mission field. Transformation, or the lack thereof, is an issue in the world the church is to serve, and it becomes an even more serious issue if it is lacking in the Body of Christ that possesses all of the means for transformation. Yet, there is growing awareness that the church is in desperate need of renewal and that active members do not seem markedly different in moral behavior from nonmembers. George Barna writes this: "One of the greatest frustrations of my life has been the disconnection between what our research consistently shows about church Christians and what the Bible calls us to be."¹⁶ Renewal is too mild a word to Barna for what needs to happen. He would welcome a revolution.¹⁷

Churches that have seen themselves as the central focus of God's purpose have become activity-heavy, inward, and self-absorbed. The church program has become the purpose, and often the most involved members are worn out from trying to keep it going. Jim Belcher's description of his own longings for something more meaningful typifies the longings of those who recognize the need for renewal.¹⁸ The need for renewal calls for a new sense of God's purpose for the church.

THE MISSIONAL FOUNDATION

The attempt to recover the purpose of God for the church in the world has been rooted in theology as much, if not more so, as in missiology. Darrell Guder details a transition from seeing mission as the expansion of Western Christianity to seeing it as

¹⁶ George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale: 2005), 31.

¹⁷ Barna, *Revolution*, 9.

¹⁸ Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009). Belcher believes that the internal debate between traditionalists and emergents prevents the learning that is necessary for renewal and attempts to build a united approach to the changes necessary for renewal.

primarily an expression of God's nature. "Rather than seeing mission as merely a strategic expression of a self-expanding church, mission began to be viewed as an essential theological characteristic of God."¹⁹ The term *missio Dei* has become the shorthand for this theological understanding. David Bosch writes about this term and says, "The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* is God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit (is) expanded to include yet another movement: Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world . . . Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God."²⁰

According to Guder, the purpose or mission of the church is to be a witness to the redemptive acts of God through Jesus Christ. "The message focuses upon the loving, gracious, inviting reality of God in our human history; it creates the radically new option of submission to God's rule and thus entry into God's kingdom."²¹ He goes on to explain that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the event that empowered the church for this purpose. "From Pentecost on, the church must be understood primarily and centrally in terms of its mission as God's people. This is the reason it exists, and for this purpose the promised Holy Spirit is given to it."²²

The purpose of God for the church in the world then focuses on the identity of the church as the people of God who are *sent* into the world. Minatrea defines a missional church as "a reproducing community of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in the world."²³

¹⁹ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 19.

²⁰ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

²¹ Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 37.

²² Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 51.

²³ Minatrea, *Shaped*, xvi.

The sense of being sent by God to engage the world with the Kingdom is a purpose that has great potential to renew a church's focus and direction. The church is forced to ask the same sorts of questions that any mission agency would ask about its mission field in order to be effective. The church is forced to turn outward, or as church consultant Bill Easum would suggest, "follow Jesus into the mission field."²⁴ Even though it is difficult for established churches to navigate the changes required to become missional, such a purpose is attractive and compelling and is certainly gaining more attention among church leaders.

PURPOSE SHAPED BY PRESENCE

Being forced to examine and recover God's purpose for the church in the world will help congregations experience significant renewal and expand their transformational impact. However, for the recovery of the purpose of God to truly reflect what God intends for the church in the world, there must be a recovery of the presence of God in the church. A spiritual purpose requires a spiritual foundation, and some question whether or not the church has the spiritual foundation to support the purpose. Most notably, Eugene Peterson does not merely question the spiritual foundation of the church in America; he argues that church ministry lacks the capital to sustain it. His focus is on the vocational ministry of the church and he addresses church leaders when he writes: "Spiritual leadership vocations in America are badly undercapitalized. Far more activity is generated by them than there are resources to support them. The volume of business in religion far outruns the spiritual capital of its leaders."²⁵ At the very least, he is saying

²⁴ Bill Easum, *Unfreezing Moves: Following Jesus Into the Mission Field* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

²⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 3.

that those who lead churches are not developing the spiritual foundation necessary for churches to be effective. There is an issue with the spiritual foundation for ministry.

Peterson's concerns are reminiscent of A.W. Tozer's call to spiritual reality nearly sixty years ago in *The Pursuit of God*, just as America was entering a time of national spiritual renewal. He warned that the evangelical church in America was doing a great job of building the altar and arranging the sacrifice upon it with its emphasis on biblical teaching but noted that the church "seems satisfied to count the stones and rearrange the pieces with never a care that there is not a sign of fire upon the top of lofty Carmel."²⁶ It seems that Tozer's call for spiritual reality never becomes irrelevant, and it may be even more critical as the purpose of the church is intensified through much of the missional discussion today.

The need for such spiritual reality and spiritual capital is highlighted by Reggie McNeal when he suggests that the church in North America has become more secular than the culture in which it exists, while the culture has become more spiritual. McNeal argues that the secularism that marked the modern era affected the church as well, with many churches operating "like giant machines with church leaders serving as mechanics. God doesn't have to show up to get done what's being done."²⁷ Moreover, as churches have noticed that they are not having the impact they expect they should have in the world, a whole industry has developed to help them "do church" better. "Pastors are flooded with mailers advertising the next conference, workshop, or seminar that will equip them and their church to do effectively the next thing necessary for ministry success. Church activity is a poor substitute for genuine spiritual vitality."²⁸

²⁶ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Chestnut, 1993), 8.

²⁷ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 7.

²⁸ McNeal, *Present Future*, 7.

McNeal observes that the culture is more interested than ever in some kind of spiritual reality and that it has rejected the total secularism of the modern era. Popular magazines annually carry cover stories about God, about Jesus, and about other faiths and areas of spirituality. In fact, many have observed that there is a spiritual awakening occurring in America. “However, it is not informed by Christian theology, and it is not happening in the church.”²⁹

McNeal believes that the spiritual vitality of the church will be recovered if the biblical mission of the church is recovered. In a church climate where technique and program easily trump substance and reality, a recovery of mission and purpose may not establish the spiritual foundation that is needed to truly be a part of what God wants to do in this world.

God’s presence in the church must shape God’s purpose for the church. Biblically, that principle is so obvious that it is usually assumed and often overlooked. It is critical that an emphasis on God’s *Purpose* be rooted in an experience of God’s *Presence*. Minatrea’s definition of a missional church as “a reproducing community of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world” makes the direct connection to God as the sender and the Ruler of the Kingdom to be proclaimed and modeled. It is the purpose of this thesis project to argue for the absolute necessity of this direct connection to God. This connection is not merely a result of an assignment given to the church by God, but is the foundation for the living reality of God in the mission of the church. There must be every attempt to resist becoming, practically speaking, *missional deists* who possess the assignment and the manual and expect little from the actual involvement of the God of the mission.

²⁹ McNeal, *Present Future*, 12.

The presence of God in the church is what builds the spiritual foundation and provides the spiritual capital for the purpose of God to be fulfilled in the world. The centrality of God's presence has always been the key factor in God's calling and purpose. God's presence is what primarily defined God's people. The Israelites were defined by their deliverance from slavery and their covenant relationship with God, but deliverance and covenant were results of God's presence through smoke by day and fire by night. In the church, presence is what Jesus promised in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20, New International Version). Through Pentecost, God's presence was established for the mission of the church by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit "on all people" (Acts 2:17). Church leaders usually see Acts 2:42-47 as presenting the paradigm of the church. Willow Creek Community Church, one of the most influential congregations in the United States, would host Acts 2:42 conferences to teach and equip churches to emulate the actions and attitudes of the Jerusalem church. Churches find the blueprint for the biblical model of the church in that passage. What is often missed is the acknowledgment that the paradigmatic first church was not a result not of intentional church organization, priority setting, ministry focus, and similar factors usually emphasized in church development, but was a result of God's direct activity through the Holy Spirit. God's presence through the poured-out Holy Spirit gave birth to this new reality of life, community, and mission in the church.

Many see Pentecost as a singular, historical event that produced the inaugural moment of the church in the world, with the church functioning out of that moment throughout history, assuming the presence of the Holy Spirit. Churches in the Pentecostal stream see the Acts Pentecost as an example of the coming of the Spirit that could and should be repeated in churches and among believers for empowerment and

equipping for ministry and mission. The purpose of this thesis project is not to suggest a renewed Pentecost but rather a renewed focus and a renewed movement towards God, seeking God's presence.

Can a church cultivate and sustain a connection to God that gives it the spiritual capital to fulfill the mission of God? The writer argues that a church must cultivate and sustain a vital connection to God in order to fulfill the mission of God. If this vital connection to God is based on God's presence in the church, the question arises as to whether or not a church can do anything to really affect God's presence. If "presence" means God's manifest, renewing, "visitation" presence, we may have to engage the discussion of renewal as it relates to God's sovereign acts or the church's applied means. What is meant by "presence" in this paper is not the special manifest presence of God in remarkable times of renewal but the sustained presence of God through creation, redemption, and mission, which the early church experienced in its life and impact. In the context of this sense of God's presence, we do not ask, "How can we get God to show up to make things go better?" The central question does not focus on God's posture towards the church. Creation, redemption, and mission establish God's posture towards the church and the world. The questions become different in this established presence of God. God's posture is not the issue, the church's posture is. So the central question is not about God's presence to the church, but about the church's presence to God. "How can the church be present to God?" defines the core issue. "What can a church do to be present to God?" points to the key applications of the central question.

The goal is to live and do church ministry and mission as a response to God, in God's presence, or present to God. To explore how a church can be present to God, the areas of leadership, worship, discipleship, service, justice, and radical engagement will be

considered. Each of these areas possesses unique indicators of a church's spiritual integrity and missional potential.

Joshua was on the threshold of the beginning of his great mission to take the land with God's people, beginning with Jericho (Joshua 5:13-17). We learn much from his brief encounter with the "commander of the army of the Lord." Like Joshua, we want to find out if this commander is for us, on our side. Like Joshua, we need to learn that this is the wrong question. Again, it is a posture question, not about where God is in reference to us but about where we are in reference to God. Are we on God's side? A God-present church knows what it is to begin with its shoes off, standing on holy ground.

CHAPTER 2:

LEADERSHIP

“Nothing but fire kindles fire,” said Phillips Brooks, the renowned nineteenth-century Boston preacher, to students at Yale Divinity School in 1877.¹ Brooks understood the absolute necessity for church leaders to have lives deeply rooted in spiritual reality. If churches are going to be present to God and have spiritual integrity, their leaders must first be those who are present to God, living and leading as a response to God.

The issue of leadership has received and continues to receive much focus in matters of church development. The health and effectiveness of a church depends on the effectiveness of its leaders. Churches and denominations have drawn on the business culture to explore the characteristics of leadership, acknowledging that business organizations even more directly than churches depend on leadership and have had to get a firm grasp on the leadership quotient. Jim Collins, noted author and speaker at both business and church conferences,² writes that he was determined to present issues about the effectiveness of an organization in a way that did not focus so much on leadership. He had grown weary of always linking effectiveness to the leadership issue. However, his research about how good organizations became great brought him back to the same conclusion: effective organizations begin with effective leaders.³

Christian Schwarz has developed an index of characteristics of healthy churches. His first characteristic focuses on leadership, emphasizing that healthy churches have

¹ Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 47.

² Example: Collins was one of the main speakers at The Leadership Summit 2006, the annual leadership conference sponsored by Willow Creek Community Church.

³ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Business, 2001), 21-22.

³ Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, 21-22.

empowered leaders who are leading well.⁴ The connection between leadership and healthy churches is also demonstrated by Stephen A. Macchia in a study of healthy church characteristics. The study was based on a survey of thousands of Christians in the New England area and was conducted when Macchia was the executive director of Vision New England. He writes, “The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers. Are the followers reaching their potential?”⁵ Macchia now directs an organization that is focused on leadership development and concentrates on the spiritual formation of leaders.⁶

These studies confirm what the biblical record reveals in respect to leadership. It is impossible to look at the impact of God’s presence and work in the world without studying leadership. The history of God’s work in the world is a history of leaders: God-directed and God-empowered men and women who step out of the ranks and engage a previously unimagined future. The stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, the Judges, the Prophets, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, and most assuredly, Jesus are all stories of leaders who were guided by God to produce the reality of God’s presence in the world. Church history follows the same pattern. It is impossible to study significant church development without studying a leader, from monastic movements with Bernard and Francis, to the Reformation with Luther and Calvin and the Great Awakening with Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield. God’s presence has been manifested most evidently in and through the lives of God’s leaders.

So critical is the role of leaders that many would attribute the lack of significant spiritual impact to the lack of effective leaders. According to Lyle Schaller, this lack of

⁴ Christian A. Schwartz, *Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources: 1996), 22.

⁵ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 123.

⁶Leadership Transformations, <http://www.leadershiptransformations.org/> (accessed April 25, 2011).

leadership is one of the most critical issues facing American Protestantism. He contends that leadership is essentially ignored in pastoral training, stating that “ordination does not even promise, much less guarantee competence as a parish pastor.”⁷

George Barna reports being discouraged about his efforts to provide information that would lead to church impact, citing a crisis in leadership. “The strategy was flawed because it had an assumption. The assumption was that the people in leadership are actually leaders . . . Most people who are in positions of leadership in local churches aren’t leaders. They’re great people, but they are not really leaders.”⁸

A THREE-FOLD LEADERSHIP CRISIS

What is being written and said about church leadership indicates a crisis in at least three areas: (1) ineffective models of leadership, (2) a shift in leadership approaches because of cultural change, and (3) the need for spiritual formation for leaders.

(1) Ineffective Models of Leadership. Consistent with Barna’s comments, the need for and value of the spiritual gift of leadership may have lacked the attention and focus it needed, until recently. Ordained and designated church leaders were not those who necessarily knew how to lead people to new realities. Official leaders were often more like chaplains offering pastoral care or teachers providing biblical instruction. Reggie McNeal outlines the development of leadership models in the church that are not effective today. His categorization of these models provides helpful handles to discuss the spiritual dynamics associated with trends in church leadership.⁹

⁷ Lyle L. Schaller, *21 Bridges to the 21st Century: The Future of Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 113.

⁸ Tim Stafford. “The Third Coming of George Barna,” *Christianity Today*, August 5, 2002, 34.

⁹ Reggie McNeal, *Revolution in Leadership: Training Apostles for Tomorrow’s Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 26ff.

The Leader as Holy Person/Priest. When leaders are trained and then function as the special experts in matters of faith, ritual and practice, matters that are beyond the normal experience of church members, they tend to become not so much leaders as surrogate Christ-followers. Leaders like this are not models as much as they are substitutes for everyone else. They are assumed to have a deeper commitment, deeper faith, and deeper relationship with God than the rest of the church. They are certainly not thought of as a normal Christian who is merely exercising their spiritual gift for the sake of the Body of Christ alongside everyone else who is collectively exercising their gifts. They are especially holy and spiritual people. The writer experienced this designated kind of leadership when a member was visiting the home and remarked, “Wow, this is the first time I have ever seen a minister in blue jeans,” indicating that the wearer must be too special for such casual clothes (this took place a few years ago, prior to blue jeans becoming the preferred uniform in some churches).

The Leader as Wordsmith/Educator. According to McNeal, “The sixteenth-century revival of the study of antiquities and the rise of the modern university system found its religious counterpart in the Reformation. Luther and Calvin signaled a focus on textual authority and redefined the church leader’s role as ‘resident scholar.’”¹⁰ The teaching ministry became the most important function of the pastor. Many hours spent in the study became the preferred task, from the congregation’s point of view. The pastor as scholar and orator was the model. It was certainly assumed that the sermon preparation was grounded in a deep spirituality, but the process of preparing sermons does not always require such a reality. There was a not-uncommon danger of the text becoming the focus apart from the life presenting the text, though the best books on homiletics, such as

¹⁰ McNeal, *Leadership*, 27.

Haddon W. Robinson's *Biblical Preaching*, gave ample encouragement and instruction for the spiritual foundation needed for preaching. Robinson is clear that the task of preparing sermons includes the truth of the text being applied to the personality and experience of the preacher. "This places God's dealing with the preacher at the center of the process . . . When a man prepares expository sermons, God prepares the man."¹¹ Nonetheless, the weekly demand of preparing sermons often prevents pastors from taking the time for spiritual development. Much too regularly, the lack of connection between the reality of the text and the reality of the life is illustrated in the nation's headlines as prominent pastors fall.

Also, if a pastor is a gifted communicator and receives much affirmation from preaching and teaching, another danger arises: the public expression of spirituality overcomes the private experience with God. In other words, the need to have something fresh, inspiring, and provocative to share with the congregation informs every other experience, including those private experiences with God. The pastor becomes self-conscious even in private moments, wondering how well private experiences might preach. The development of social media like Facebook, blogging, and Twitter have exponentially expanded the public realm of today's pastors. To build a blog audience requires daily entries, and Twitter may prompt many tweets each day. One pastor tweeted that he was reading a book in his favorite coffee shop while on vacation at his parents. A clever reader was able to deduce where that may be and managed to meet the star pastor.¹² Essentially, some pastors never unplug or never get off the stage, taking it and the audience into every other experience. When God is reduced to a source for

¹¹ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 24.

¹² Social media is being used wisely and effectively by many pastors and should be explored as a "new measure" (the term used by Charles Finney to describe innovation, *Lectures on Revival* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1988), 107).

engaging material, the pastor is no longer present to God. The goal is to have the private experience with God be primary and to let it shape the public expression, not the other way around. The Gospels give us some descriptions of Jesus' wilderness moments, but most withdrawals are just that, withdrawals. Hopefully a pastor is transparent about his private walk with God but does not always take the public self-consciousness into that private walk.

The Leader as Chaplain/Parish Minister. This model of leadership emphasizes the role of the pastor as a shepherd who is tending the flock. This leader is always available for crises and key life events. Typically in small churches, the pastoral care ministry to the congregation becomes the chief responsibility of the pastor. The pastor's agenda is then set by the immediate and varying needs of individual members and families. Similar to the priest model, a normal Christian practice becomes limited to the leader rather than multiplied among the gifted members of the congregation. If a pastor has strong caring gifts, he or she will derive much affirmation from serving people in this way, but they risk seeing themselves as the solution to the trials and tribulations of others. Also, their worth becomes closely linked with the latest rescue. A spiritual danger to the leader in this model is that often ministry success becomes defined by member satisfaction with the pastor's on-call performance, and attempting to please everyone becomes the default goal and object of the pastor's energy. This pastor perhaps becomes present to almost everyone in the church, but not necessarily present to God.

The Leader as Professional Minister/Executive. Perhaps the most recent model of church leadership has been that of the pastor as an effective CEO. The demands of growing churches and megachurches place a premium on the leader who can cast vision and organize vast resources. The leader who can produce change and develop innovative

programs and ministries has become the paradigm for the successful pastor. It is not surprising that business literature on leadership has become so popular among pastors. An emphasis on a style of leadership in which leaders know “how to get things done” has not been a totally unhelpful corrective to the passive servant-leader who needed others to set the course and who produced little change or impact. John Maxwell illustrates an interesting crossover between the worlds of church and business. He was a pastor of a growing church who began to write on leadership, and his books are used widely among church and business leaders.¹³ His books are found in the business section of most bookstores. Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church has been the most prominent example of a pastor who values and uses business models of leadership. His leadership has been so notable that students in the MBA program of the Harvard Business School are assigned to do a case study based on Willow Creek.

There are several spiritual dangers with this model of leadership. The first is the dangerous emphasis on outward results: outcomes that would almost fit on a profit and loss report. Admittedly, some accounting of outcomes is helpful and responsible, but when organizational outcomes define success, ministry risks getting tilted to whatever produces the desired outcomes. Educators have faced this same dynamic with the emphasis on end-of-grade testing. Teachers begin to teach with the purpose of producing the best test results, not necessarily the best learning, potentially corrupting educational integrity.¹⁴ Instead of reflecting substance, outcomes trump substance, potentially producing a shallow experience.

Another danger of this model of leadership is that it does not foster character development. Leaders are defined as those who produce results, and if the results are

¹³ John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership Workbook* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002).

¹⁴ Stephen D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakanomics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 24ff.

mostly numbers and ministry expansion, there may actually be a vacuum when it comes to character requirements. The external replaces the internal in respect to priority.

Gordon MacDonald offers a warning about what he calls missionalism, “the belief that the worth of one’s life is determined by the achievement of a grand objective.”¹⁵ He says this about pastors who are migrating into their forties: “Many are struggling with exhaustion, superficial relationships, shallowness, and the what’s next syndrome.”¹⁶ The moral failure of some great pastors who have developed great ministries is all too often a demonstration of the disconnect between ministry achievement and spiritual character development.

Those who note the need for better leadership development, like McNeal, argue for new models of leadership, such as apostolic leaders and missional leaders. Ideally, these new models will require a strong spiritual connection to God. For instance, an apostolic leader by nature should be someone sent by God, thus responding to God’s call and empowering.

(2) A Shift in Leadership Approaches Because of Cultural Change. Much of the emphasis in new leadership models focuses on better cultural engagement as leaders face a postmodern environment. Comparisons are made between the pluralistic first century that the apostles faced and the post-Christian environment that leaders face. Leaders are urged to contextualize the Gospel and to innovate as the first leaders in the church did. The cultural changes that McLaren, Gibbs, and Hirsch write about require new models of leadership.

Robert Webber writes that a new breed of leaders for the twenty-first century will set the pace for these new leadership models. Agreeing with those who describe the

¹⁵ Gordon MacDonald, “Dangers of Missionalism,” *Leadership*, Winter 2007, 39.

¹⁶ MacDonald, *Leadership*, 40.

cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity, Webber argues that evangelicalism itself is in a state of change. “Twentieth-century evangelicals held fast to a biblically informed and historically tested faith, but they saw it, explained it, and presented it in a cultural situation that no longer exists.”¹⁷ He believes that many emerging leaders born after 1975 will intuitively make the shift in leadership models because they have been shaped by the emerging culture, just as their predecessors were shaped by their own culture. He describes three types of leadership models that are not strictly based on age or era, although they are defined by certain eras. The traditional model of post-World War II leaders reflected a rationalistic approach to the Gospel. The pragmatist model of the seventies and eighties reflected a business approach to the Gospel with an emphasis on church growth. In respect to the younger evangelical model, Webber writes, “The *younger evangelical* is anyone, older or younger, who deals thoughtfully with the shift from twentieth- to twenty-first-century culture. He or she is committed to construct a biblically rooted, historically informed, and culturally aware new evangelism witness in the twenty-first century.”¹⁸ He lists twenty-four characteristics of this new model of leader with perhaps the most prominent ones being a self-consciousness of growing up in a new era, the willingness to critique recent as well as current models of ministry and leadership, and a renewal of ancient Christian forms and approaches.¹⁹

It would not be wise to dismiss sweeping claims about cultural change and their impact on the church, on ministry, and on leadership. The example of the spread of the Gospel presented in Acts illustrates Webber’s thesis. God did not call Peter to be the apostle to the Gentiles, but Paul, and the cultural adaption was enormous as the Gospel expanded from its Jewish cultural framework. It is hard to imagine what today would be

¹⁷ Robert L. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 16.

¹⁸ Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 18.

¹⁹ Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 54.

comparable to the change that happened when the church no longer insisted on circumcision. The early church was torn apart over it, and even Peter struggled to accept the leadership of these younger evangelicals.

Effective leadership does not require us to float like a feather on the wind of every change, but we are forced to be learners, to be able to adapt. The need to be ever responsive to the context in which we find ourselves demands being present to God more than ever. Milfred Minatrea, writing on leadership, begins his description of the missional leader with a healthy emphasis on the leader's spiritual life, listing "A Deep Intimacy with God," as the first characteristic of such a leader. "The missional leader's intimacy with God is critical. The *missio Dei* demands a relationship with the God whose mission it is. Foremost, missional leaders are those who have come into a personal relationship as followers of Jesus Christ. They are not content to know about God; they hunger to know God . . . Their sense of mission derives from the nature of the relationship God desires with them. They understand they did not choose God, but rather He chose them – for relationship and mission."²⁰

(3) The Need for Spiritual Formation for a Leader. As Minatrea asserts, leaders need to have a deep and sustained hunger for a growing relationship with God in order to be present to God. The foundation for this hunger begins with the sense of calling that is often described as part of spiritual leadership. The Apostle Paul expresses this sense of calling well in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-5 as he describes his motives in ministry. He demonstrates what it means to be truly present to God in life and ministry. He and his companions did not have any impure motives as they spoke to those in Thessalonica. "On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We

²⁰ Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 156-157.

are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else . . . You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you” (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6, 10).

The connection to God in that passage is remarkable. Paul, as a leader, is first of all “approved by God.” Then his heart is constantly “tested” by God. Finally, his life and ministry are “witnessed” by God. God not only observes Paul’s life and ministry, but he could stand and testify to its spiritual authenticity.

Paul resists the temptation that overcomes many pastors and leaders of being more present to ministry ambition and to the congregation than to God. He often has to appeal to his fundamental spiritual commitment when his ministry is misunderstood or when it stands in contrast to the ministry of others. To the Corinthians, he writes, “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God (2 Corinthians 2:17).” God is always the primary reference point for Paul as a leader. Bill Easum writes of this important leadership principle, “Leaders serve Jesus Christ in the midst of a congregation instead of serving a congregation . . . Ineffective pastors make a fatal mistake when they think they’re supposed to serve the congregation. When that is their goal, they become like Aaron, whose claim to fame is that he helped the rebellious Israelites build a golden calf. Many pastors today are building golden calves instead of pointing people to Jesus Christ.”²¹ Leaders who are first and foremost present to God find golden-calf building impossible.

²¹ Bill Easum, *Leadership on the Other Side* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 158-159.

Another danger of being more present to people or a congregation than to God arises as the pastor or leader succumbs to defining their identity and mission by the affirmations of others. Henri Nouwen wrote about the “compulsive” pastor who has actually become secular instead of spiritual:

Just look for a moment at our daily routine. In general we are very busy people. We have many meetings to attend, many visits to make, many services to lead. Our calendars are filled with appointments, our days and weeks filled with engagements, and our hearts filled with plans and projects. There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do and we move through life in such a distracted way that we do not even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are worth thinking, saying, or doing. We simply go along with the many ‘musts’ and ‘oughts’ that have been handed on to us, and live with them as if they were authentic translations of the Gospel of our Lord . . .

All this is simply to suggest how horrendously secular our ministerial lives tend to be . . . Our identity, our sense of self, is at stake. Secularity is a way of being dependent on the responses of our milieu.²²

According to Nouwen, this compulsion to rely on the affirmation of others leads to the two greatest enemies of the spiritual life: anger and greed. “Anger in particular seems close to a professional vice in the contemporary ministry. Pastors are angry at their leaders for not leading and at their followers for not following. They are angry at those who do not come to church for not coming and angry at those who do come for coming without enthusiasm.”²³ The point is that this pattern in ministry poisons the spirit of a leader, certainly hurting their connection to God.

Eugene Peterson also identifies this disconnect with God among leaders and suggests that pastors have become “branch managers of religious warehouses.”²⁴ He writes about going to the elders at the church he served and resigning, concluding that being a pastor was not compatible with being a Christian.²⁵ After some conversation

²² Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Harper One, 1991), 21-22.

²³ Nouwen, *Way of the Heart*, 23.

²⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 38.

²⁵ Peterson, *Unpredictable Plant*, 37.

with the stunned board, he realized that he was attempting to sustain a leadership model that his church did not require or desire for him. They wanted him to be deeply rooted in spiritual reality, serving out of the fullness of a meaningful relationship with God. The crisis forced him to review his calling and his sense of purpose for being in the ministry. His words are helpful to any pastor or church leader: “God and passion. That is why I was a pastor, that is why I had come to this place: to live with passion – and to gather others into the presence of God, introducing them into the possibilities of a passionate life.”²⁶

While Paul’s statements give an explicit expression of being present to God, it is the model of Jesus that instructs leaders on the habits of being present. Most notable is what could be referred to as “The Wilderness Habit,” which is Jesus’ practice of withdrawing into the wilderness, desert, or solitary places to maintain and sustain his connection with the Father. Mark’s Gospel especially highlights the wilderness scenes as God launches a second exodus for his people. Jesus’ baptism and confirmation with the Holy Spirit and the Father’s voice occur in the wilderness. His public ministry does not start until after his extended time in the wilderness. Consequently, his life and ministry were rooted in a wilderness connection with God. After Jesus’ first full day of public ministry, he immediately retreats to the wilderness before the next day begins. His disciples are surprised to find him there and essentially scold him for withdrawing from the apparent need and opportunity of the ministry back in Capernaum. Perhaps it was the case that the public demand required the private retreat because in the private retreat, Jesus seems to confirm his call and mission. He does not accept the agenda of the disciples but sets his course to continue the mission given by the Father. It is also

²⁶ Peterson, *Unpredictable Plant*, 45.

noteworthy that after the disciples return from their first public ministry assignment, Jesus immediately attempts to take them to the wilderness (Mark 6:30).

To be present to God, a leader needs to know who they are and what they are when they are with no one but God. Certainly leaders are not present to God only when they are alone in their individual experience because there is an experience and presence with God that happens within the context of community and relationships, but personal and private time alone with God is fundamental to spiritual reality. Having a wilderness habit time alone with God that is more than just doing a “quiet time” will reveal to the leader who and what they think they are before God. Many quiet time habits are often no more than checking in with the boss, reporting and quickly reviewing the most current and pressing ministry issues and concerns. An honest leader in this kind of pattern may realize that they really see themselves more like an employee or worker. In that case, God becomes more like the manager and the resource coordinator of what is needed to get the job done. Or worse, they may really see themselves as a child who is striving for parental approval. In both settings, the ministry performance is the primary reference point rather than a meaningful and loving relationship with God.

Being present to God means that God is the primary and ultimate reference point: his glory, character, and love are the ultimate realities. Fred Smith, a business leader who speaks on spiritual life and leadership, describes a “spiritual audit” that he has learned to conduct to assess his spiritual health. Among the twelve questions he asks himself are a few that would be helpful to any leader who wants to assess their willingness and inclination to be present to God.

1. *Am I content with whom I am becoming?*
2. *Is there a quiet center to my life?*

3. *Do I maintain an awe of God?*
4. *Is my prayer life growing?*
5. *Is my humility genuine?*²⁷

Other questions that might be helpful are:

1. *Am I honest with God about my hopes and disappointments?*
2. *Do my life and ministry more and more reflect eternal realities? (e.g., I will not be doing this forever.)*
3. *Am I becoming a more joyful and thankful person?*
4. *Do my relationships with others reflect the love and purpose of Christ?*
5. *Is my life increasingly experiencing the fruit, power, and leadership of the Holy Spirit?*

To have the level of reflection that could consider those questions would require a regular wilderness practice. Without the discipline of retreat and withdrawal, a leader will find it difficult if not impossible to truly be present to God. What congregations most desperately need is to have leaders who lead and serve out of who and what they are with God.

WHEN THE LEADER IS PRESENT

BUT GOD IS NOT

Sooner or later, the Christian leader becomes acquainted with the story of Nehemiah, who apart from Jesus is cited as one of the best examples of leadership in the Bible. Amazingly, he overcomes all odds and opposition and accomplishes the impossible: he rebuilds the ruined walls and burnt gates of Jerusalem. His abilities to plan, recruit, adapt, and persist are remarkable and all are traced to one reality: “the

²⁷ Fred Smith, “Conducting a Spiritual Audit,” *Leadership*, Winter 1998, 41-46.

gracious hand of my God was upon me” (Nehemiah 2:8, 19). Nehemiah’s prayer life gives evidence of a leader who is very much present to God.

So Nehemiah’s example becomes a paradigm for leadership. Even though there is great opposition to his leadership, the bottom line is that he succeeds. God was with him. This paradigm of success because of a present, empowering God builds an expectation in a leader to experience the same. However, there are times in the spiritual life when God seems anything but present. What John of the Cross calls the “dark night of the soul” is an experience in which all the normal pleasures of knowing and enjoying God are withdrawn. Classic devotional literature may speak of this experience as a dry time or a wilderness experience, but not the same kind of wilderness experience that Jesus would often experience in his ministry. Perhaps Jesus’ pre-ministry wilderness experience may have included this loss of perceived presence, but most of his withdrawals seemed to be times of heightened connection with his Father.

It is interesting that Richard Foster’s writing on prayer immediately includes a chapter on the “Prayer of the Forsaken.”²⁸ Paul Miller writes well about what he describes as the desert. “The Father turning his face against you is the heart of the desert experience. Life has ended. It no longer has any point. You might not want to commit suicide, but death would be a relief . . . God takes everyone he loves through a desert. It is his cure for our wandering hearts, restlessly searching for a new Eden.”²⁹

The desert is where a leader gets refined and centered on God alone. Everything else is left behind. It is a difficult process, usually with no end in sight. Leaders risk losing heart at this time, or worse. Some leaders fall into moral sin to find some comfort, affirmation, or some recovery of vitality.

²⁸ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 17.

²⁹ Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (Colorado Springs, CO: Napress, 2009), 184.

Relationships with mentors and friends are critical. Unfortunately, many leaders have not built the network of such relationships, so when they are in the desert, they really are alone. Self-awareness is key at this time. Leaders must have enough awareness to seek professional counseling; having an early alert system that does not wait until disaster makes help unavoidable. An astute young-adult daughter asked her father, a pastor who had an affair, why he had “committed ministry suicide.” She knew that there was more behind the act than just sexual immorality.

If a pastor has lived with an idealized view of himself and his role, he is particularly at risk when in the desert. He or she will either deny the desert experience or interpret it as failure or rejection by God. Since most pastors do not talk about their desert experiences unless crises make it unavoidable, few pastors are in range of anyone who can help. Add to all of this the American model of a successful pastor, and one may become bitter or cynical because of comparison.

When God seems absent, leaning on God is all the more essential, waiting for his story to unfold. One will come to the point of desiring nothing but God. Then real growth happens.

CHAPTER 3:

WORSHIP

“There was a lot of air in that place,” said Ray, as he described his experience when he visited a church at the invitation of a friend. I met Ray one Saturday afternoon as he was preparing to host a memorial service in his front yard for his ninety-three-year-old mother-in-law. He was the big man wearing a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and flip-flops, holding a beer in his hand, shouting, “We better get this thing going. Looks like it might rain.”

After we met, he began to tell me about his limited church experience. A friend had invited him to a growing church that had lively music, multi-media, and a lot of young people. He was impressed with the obvious life and vitality of the church, not at all what he expected. If the church had not been so far from his home, it would have been a place to which he would return.

Ray’s description about the place being full of air was more than a reflection on the style of the church’s worship service. He was commenting on the life of the church when it gathered to worship. It is in gathered worship that a church will first and most publicly give evidence that it is present to God. The first aim of a leader who is present to God is to invite others into that reality. The corporate experience will indicate whether that aim is being realized.

Worship is the chief end of the church, according to John Stott. Evangelism is often thought to be the primary task of the church, but Stott argues that there are three reasons why evangelism does not hold this preeminent position:

1. Evangelism falls under our duty to our neighbor, while worship is our duty to God, which is our first duty.

2. Evangelism involves a particular gifting not shared by all believers, although all believers have a responsibility to witness of Christ.
3. Evangelism is a temporary activity, which will cease when Christ returns and the kingdom is fulfilled.¹

Although, Stott's conclusion about worship being the chief end of the church is correct, the math he uses in respect to evangelism is not, primarily because it is too binary in its logic and approach. For instance, to separate love of neighbor from love of God does not seem to be a biblical position. "And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:21). The point that evangelism is temporary, the activity of the church in this age, would actually suggest its priority. It could be argued that evangelism is the only activity that explains the current address of the church – in the world, rather than transferred to heaven.

There are several other reasons why worship is the chief end of the church:

1. *It is the right response to the God who is revealed as the majestic Creator and loving Redeemer.* The instruction of Psalm 100 for the whole earth to worship God with a great shout and joyful thanksgiving typifies the call throughout Scripture to respond to the One who has made us and to whom we belong as his people. Eugene Peterson describes that in contrast to our cultural ancestors, the Greeks, our faith ancestors, the Hebrews, saw life as a response to God, that God was the starting point of all of life. Their response was expressed in the primary language of worship: prayer.

The Hebrews were not so much interested in understanding the human condition as they were in responding to the divine reality. Their supreme effort was to hear God's word, not to tell stories about gods. Their characteristic speech form was not the myth but the prayer. They were deeply committed to a way of life that pivoted on the acts of God.²

It is not surprising, then, that any direct encounter with God immediately results in worship. Such worship includes an apprehension of the glory of God that automatically leads to being undone, as it were, humbled and acutely aware of one's sinfulness. Isaiah's encounter with God described in Isaiah 6 is the most

¹ John Stott, *The Living Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 34.

² Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 41.

obvious example. His call to be a prophet begins with being present to God, and that being-present can only be characterized as worship. His missional response to answer the call to be sent is an outcome of that worship.

Another enlightening example of worship being the immediate result of being present to God is found in Joshua 5:13-15. Preparing for the battle for Jericho, Joshua sees an armed man and inquires, "Are you for us or our enemies?" He quickly discovers that he has asked the wrong question, when the armed man identifies himself as the commander of the Lord's army. Suddenly, the issue is not about how this warrior may be aligned with Joshua, but how Joshua is to be aligned with him. How does Joshua respond? By an act of worship: removing his shoes, falling face down on the ground, and seeking the will of this divine person.

The only right response to a Living God is worship, and a church will best express the reality of being present to God when it gathers to worship.

2. *It is the response to God that saves us from centering our lives on things that destroy us.* The Bible makes it clear that you are what you worship, and that you will worship something. Something or someone will be the ultimate source of security or the primary object of devotion. In the Old Testament, idolatry was the clearest expression of false worship. Isaiah 40, perhaps one of the grandest chapters celebrating the majesty and loving care of God, describes how absurd it is to trust in things that are made by human hands. The irony is powerful when Isaiah states that a man too poor to even make an offering to an idol is actually the one who makes it (Isaiah 40:20).

Psalms 115:4-9 not only reveals the futility of worshipping idols, but the terrible effect idolatry has on people.

But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men.
They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see;
they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell;
they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk;
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.

Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

3. *It is the response to God that most transforms us.* A chapter break between Romans 11 and 12 risks a near-miss in one of the most powerful statements about the transforming impact of worship. After spending the previous part of the letter explaining the nature of the Gospel, in Romans 11:33-36 Paul soars to a crescendo that cannot find a grand enough way to worship God. Even though Paul says that it is impossible to trace out the path of God, he has traced out the path of the Gospel, which has graciously grafted in the Gentiles through a faith and obedience based on faith in the work of Christ. If Paul was dictating this letter to someone like Silas, one can imagine him rising to his feet, with full range of gesture as he says:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be
the glory forever! Amen.

A chapter break then occurs and the imperatives of the Gospel are spelled out, beginning with the exhortation to present one's body as a living sacrifice – a call to worship with absolute dedication. Paul explains that this presentation is based on God's mercy, as previously explained (Romans 12:1). The response includes resisting being conformed and shaped by the world, by being transformed by the renewing of one's mind. What then follows is the radical ethic of being so vitally connected to the Church that one functions as a member of a living body, the Body of Christ, and takes on the love and behavior of Christ towards others.

People are transformed by the worship of God. I recall talking with a visitor who had just begun coming to our church. She said, "I feel like I am a different person when I come here." That was her way of reporting that being present to God in that worship environment was changing her life. Walt Kallestad, pastor of the Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona describes the impact of worship. "It is while consciously in the presence of God and in the presence of God's people that we come to know ourselves more deeply. The secrets of our hearts are disclosed, and the secret of God's great *nevertheless* love for us is revealed. This happens in worship when all that we are and all that we yearn to be are brought into God's redeeming presence in the company of a worshipping community."³

4. *It is the response that corrects the primary flaw and sin of all humanity.*
According to Romans 1:18-23 the root sin of humanity was the failure to worship: not glorifying God or giving thanks to him. Instead of worshipping God, humanity exchanged the glory of God for that which was created, worshipping created things instead of the Creator. Bringing people into a worshipping relationship with God, having been reconciled by the blood of Christ, renewed by the Spirit of God is the goal of evangelism. Preparing people for an eternity in the presence of God shapes the hope and vision of the church as it worships.

Recently, my daughter, a sophomore in college, who is beginning to choose her own ministry environment after being detached and indifferent her freshman year, wanted me to listen to a song she had downloaded on iTunes. She had begun to attend an informal, student-led event that was known as "Tuesday Night Worship." It meets in a historic Episcopal chapel on the edge of campus at 9:30pm. Students crowd the dimly lit chapel and leaders, sitting on the floor in the front lead them through songs and Scripture readings, without much introduction and with no other speaking, except for scattered times of prayer. This worship experience has been going on for years, passing through several student generations already.

The song my daughter wanted me to hear, "Awakening" by Chris Tomlin, is a prayer for God to awaken our hearts to worship him. It was in the worship environment of that group that my daughter found herself present to God, and that

³ Walt Kallestadt, *Turn Your Church Inside Out* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 71.

experience was transforming and contagious. The worshipping experience of a church or a Christian group is the place where people most powerfully become present to God.

In the survey of healthy church characteristics conducted by Vision New England with thousands of Christians, the first two elements identified were *God's Empowering Presence* and *God-Exalting Worship*. According to Stephen Macchia, "Experiencing the empowering presence of God is something we all long for from the deepest recesses of our spiritual being. We long to know the Spirit's power in our lives and to live moment by moment in his presence."⁴

Deriving principles of worship from Isaiah's experience in the temple (Isaiah 6) Macchia identifies four principles of worship:

1. God is seeking God-seekers, his gift to us is his heart, and he longs for us to receive it with joy.
2. We need to cultivate his heart within us.
3. We must grow our collective heart for God as his people.
4. We are commissioned to share his heart with others.⁵

Macchia's list of healthy church elements does not begin with programs, facilities, or staff. David Platt has suggested that successful church ministry in America has been reduced to these things: performance, places, programs, and professionals.⁶ Christian A. Schwartz has also identified inspiring worship as a key essential in a healthy church.⁷

⁴ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 27.

⁵ Macchia, *Healthy Church*, 49.

⁶ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010), 90.

⁷ Charles Schwartz, *Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 30-31.

As vital as worship is to the health of a church, George Barna argues that few Christians report that they actually experience the presence of God in worship services.

According to Barna:

1. Eight out of every ten believers do not feel they have entered into the presence of God, or experienced a connection with Him, during the worship service.
 2. Half of all believers say they do not feel they have entered into the presence of God or experienced a genuine connection with Him during the past year.
 3. Only one out of every four church members says that when they worship God, they expect Him to be the primary beneficiary of their worship.⁸
- However, the Brehm Center of Worship, Theology and the Arts at Fuller

Theological Seminary has a more positive report about the impact of worship among the churches that it has studied. Alexis D. Abernethy writes that as high as ninety-one percent of those surveyed said that they had felt the presence of God in worship, and seventy-four percent felt like they were hearing from God in worship. Many people reported that they had experienced cognitive, relational, and behavioral changes through worship. Changes in a greater sense of purpose and meaning, belief, and in attitude towards others were identified.⁹

“We assemble for worship to gain familiarity with the One who knows us so well, to experience personally God’s forgiveness, and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit for faithful living,” writes Clayton J. Schmidt in the same collaborative project.¹⁰ John T. Witvliet lists five areas in which our lives are formed through being present to God in worship:

1. Conceptual: Presented are concepts and practices such as the Trinity.
2. Perspective: Seeing life and its dimensions from a sacred point of view.

⁸ George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale: 2005), 32.

⁹ Alexis D. Abernethy, “Implications for Theology, Research, and Worship Practice,” in *Worship That Changes Lives*, ed. Alexis, D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 272.

¹⁰ Clayton J. Schmit, “Worship as a Locus for Transformation,” in *Worship That Changes Lives*, ed. Alexis, D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 26.

3. Emotions: Such as awe, joy, genuine guilt.
4. Relationships: How we experience God and others.
5. Virtues: Taking ourselves out of the center of the universe.¹¹

No one can remain the same if they are truly present to God in worship. Hearts can definitely harden if they choose not to worship, but the person who is the least bit open to an encounter with the Living God will not leave the same. Even the person who is not open but suddenly discovers that they are in the presence of God is transformed. Such was the experience of the Samaritan woman from John 4. She may have been thirsty, but she was certainly not looking to draw near to God. It is interesting that in this dramatic encounter with Jesus, the subject of worship comes up as the woman, perhaps in an attempt to shift the focus from her personal life introduces a religious disagreement between Samaritans and Jews. As a response Jesus makes one of the most direct statements about worship recorded in the Gospels. God seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth, Jesus says (John 4:23-24). After she replies by saying that when the Messiah comes he will explain everything, Jesus lets her know that he is that Messiah. Finding herself present with God's Anointed transforms the woman, and she becomes one of the first evangelists for the Lord. Although she was not engaged in a public, corporate worship experience she does illustrate the transformation that happens when someone is present to God, or in this case, the Messiah.

I recall an account a man gave to me of his own experience from attending a worship service. He arrived at church in an angry mood because of some things that had happened to him over the weekend. He did not want to be at church, but he had recently developed the habit of attending on Sunday mornings. He was angry and resistant to

¹¹ John D. Witvliet, "The Cumulative Power of Transformation in Public Worship, in *Worship That Changes Lives*, ed. Alexis, D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 50.

God. He even made a fist against the sanctuary door as he pushed it open. The sermon was about the conversion of Saul from Acts 9. The man said that as he listened to the account of a man angrier than himself being encountered by the Risen Lord, suddenly there were tears on his cheeks as that same Risen Lord was there with him. Being present to God in worship was what he most needed.

WHO MAY WORSHIP?

Is the gathered worship experience intended for believers only? That question became a more active and challenging question about thirty years ago when Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL. pioneered the “seeker” service. Simultaneously, Saddleback Community Church was conducting similar services, designed to be highly relevant to perceived needs and culturally contexted to a media and entertainment-oriented world. Robert Schuller, a generation earlier, had already built the Crystal Cathedral on the same outreach strategy.¹² To be fair to Saddleback, Rick Warren still saw their Sunday services as worship services, but designed for relevant engagement. For instance, in contrast to Willow, Saddleback’s service still included congregational singing as a key part of the service, whereas Willow did little congregation singing, replacing it with presentation music.

Ironically, Willow’s identification of separate services for seekers (weekend service) and for believers (mid-week services) reinforced a bifurcation of those expected to be engaged in worship. It was standard thinking to assume that worship was for the

¹² In a personal conversation I had with John Stott in 1998, I asked him what he thought about Willow Creek. He replied that he had recently spoken there and that he thought that it was “one of the best examples I have every seen of contextualizing the Gospel, without compromising the scandal of the cross.”

believing church. Theologian Millard J. Erickson makes the case of separating the different functions of the church.

In biblical times the church gathered for worship and instruction. Then it went out to evangelize. In worship, the members of the church focus upon God; in instruction and fellowship, they focus upon themselves and fellow Christians, in evangelism, they turn their attention to non-Christians. It is well for the church to keep some separation between these several activities. If this is not done, one or more may be crowded out.¹³

Thomas Schatter delineates the thinking around the different activities of the church in a clear distinction between worship and missions. He writes that liturgy is seen as the key activity for those inside the church while mission is what takes place on the outside where the Gospel is proclaimed to those who are not Christians. “The relationship between the inside activity of worship and the outside activity of mission is portrayed thus: worship nurtures the individual and sustains the community in its life before God and in its life together, and from where Christians go out to serve the church’s mission as proclaimers and doers of the gospel.”¹⁴

In my first few years of serving as the teaching pastor at a church that had been known for its Bible-teaching, believer-nurturing ministry, Schatter’s distinction between worship and mission was said to me nearly verbatim by an elder. “Church is where I come to get fed and equipped so that I can go out to reach others.” The tacit assumption was that whatever happened in worship was not expected to be relevant to those who were not already Christians. Outsiders were welcomed, not as participants, but as spectators to the faithful participants.

Pastor Walt Kallistad challenges the assumption that worship is only for the believer and suggests that it is a false argument that suggests it.

¹³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1057.

¹⁴ Thomas H. Schatter, ed. *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 2.

What is worship about? Is it about nurturing God's people deeper into the faith, or is it about evangelizing those without faith, or on the margins of faith? Neither! Worship is about neither nurture or evangelism – it is about encounter.” In worship people encounter God, and God encounters them.

In that encounter, faithful people will be nurtured and those without faith will be evangelized. If worship is about encounter, then the distinction between so-called seekers' worship and believers' worship is a false one.¹⁵

Theologically, the discussion might change if different questions were asked: Is there anyone who should not be called to worship God? Is there anyone who should not turn to God and be present to Him? Is there anyone who does not need the life-transformation that only God can bring? Is not all the earth commanded to make a joyful noise and come before Him with singing (Psalm 100:1)?

Missional concerns the past two decades have led many churches to more intentionally open the doors of worship to their mission fields. Churches have experienced great conflict in the “worship wars” over how to be a missional, worshipping community. The conflict has usually been centered around musical style: contemporary, traditional, or blended. Megachurches like Willow Creek and Saddleback set the pace in presenting musical styles that mirrored the general musical tastes of the culture. This design shift in worship was not just an American change. I have visited what are considered to be strong, vital, and growing churches in Nairobi, Kenya and Fortaleza, Brazil. Both pastors had similar stories about how their churches became much more effective in reaching their communities when they shifted their musical style from a traditional style to a culturally relevant approach. Their traditional style was a reflection of western Protestant worship of past eras. Not only did they worship with western hymnody, but the pastors wore suits and the order of the service was traditional as well.

¹⁵Walt Kallistad, *Turning Your Church Inside Out* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2001), 73-74.

At Nairobi Chapel the pastors now wear African shirts and their congregations sing contemporary songs, some written in Swahili and other tribal languages. Thus, they have made worship accessible to many in their community.

HOW TO WORSHIP

Even though Clayton Schmidt reports that “the era of fighting over worship styles and musical preferences in worship is, in some camps, drawing to a close,” churches still wrestle over for whom the service is intended.¹⁶ The missional concern changes the questions from *Whom?* to *Where?* The development of the Emergent Movement has added the question *When?* with the answer being the postmodern era. Emergent leaders and churches reject both the pragmatism of the market-driven approach and the dated, Christianized, traditional approach. Jim Belcher attempts to bridge the divide between traditional and emergent by finding a third way to approach worship. He describes the experience of his peers and himself as looking for worship “that embodied a genuine encounter with God, had depth and substance, included more frequent and meaningful Communion, was participatory, read more Scripture in worship, creatively used the senses, provided more time for contemplation, and focused on the transcendence and otherness of God.”¹⁷ He avoids rejecting tradition or culture, writing, “We attempt to hold the Bible, the tradition and our cultural context in tension, allowing them, to inform every part of our worship.”

Belcher’s church uses the following principles in planning worship to ensure people in their missional context have the opportunity to encounter God.

¹⁶ Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 11.

¹⁷ Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 126.

1. Ancient and New: The goal is to take the best of the tradition and breathe new life into it for the twenty-first century.
2. Biblical Drama: Five acts - calling, cleansing, constitution, communion and commission.
3. Joy and Reverence.
4. Priesthood of all believers.
5. Profound but accessible sermons.
6. Weekly Communion.
7. Guest friendly – doxological evangelism.¹⁸

No one is more noted for recovering traditional forms of worship for use today than Robert Webber. His goal? “Drawing wisdom from the past and translating these insights into the present and future life of the church.”¹⁹ He provides a historical analysis of the major shifts in worship in most recent church history. The Reformation recovered Scripture and preaching for worship, but in its rejection of the Catholic mass it reduced the full story of God that forms the narrative of worship. Later, seventeenth-century evangelicalism made worship more about education and then experience, with the focus on Christ’s atoning work and forgiveness from sins. Webber argues that worship should be a re-enactment of God’s story. “Worship proclaims, enacts and sings God’s story. Worship is not a program. Nor is worship about me. Worship is a narrative – God’s narrative of the world from its beginning to its end.”²⁰

Webber argues that the narrative of God’s story became reduced through church history and that the grand sweep of creation to a new earth was fragmented with only

¹⁸ Belcher, *Deep Church*, 138.

¹⁹ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 19.

²⁰ Webber, *Ancient-Future*, 39-40

certain elements of the narrative being retained.²¹ However, it does not appear that Webber addresses the unique expression of God's narrative represented in the redemptive work of Christ. In Christ there is a climax to God's narrative that becomes the center of Christian worship. Even though the fulfillment of Christ's redemption and glorification is yet to come, nonetheless, Christ represented the time being fulfilled for God to manifest his work of redemption (Ephesians 3:8-11). Just as the salvation work of God in the Exodus was the central theme of Jewish worship, the work of Christ is to be the central theme of Christian worship. It seems that Webber reduces the work of Christ to one of many chapters in God's story, rather than the climax of God's story, up to this time.

Others who are writing about worship do frame it in the work of God through Christ by speaking of a four-fold focus to worship. Constance M. Cherry writes that corporate worship re-enacts a pattern of movement seen throughout Scripture, and especially in the Gospel. The movements are described by *Gathering, Word, Table, Sending*.²²

According to Cherry there are several ways that church leaders approach the planning of worship services.

1. The Random Approach: a variety of elements in the service not necessarily linked.
2. The Blank Sheet Approach: themes suggest creative and innovate ways to re-create worship each service.²³
3. The Fill-in-the Blank Approach: plugging in elements to a template.
4. The Prescribed Approach: liturgical according to church tradition.
5. The Dialogical Approach: ordered around a God-initiated encounter.²⁴

²¹ Weber, *Ancient-Future*, 41.

²² Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 47.

²³ This approach is illustrated by Milfred Minatrea as "rewriting worship every week," which he identifies as a practice of effective missional churches. *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004), 65.

She supports the dialogical approach because it aligns well with a theology of worship that focuses on God and His actions. God approaches, God speaks, the people respond, and then God sends. She sees this pattern expressed in the ministry of Jesus as he gathers his disciples, sanctifies them with the Word, connects with them through table fellowship, instituting the essential connection through the Eucharist, and then sends them out. “Worship is a journey – a journey into God’s presence (gathering), of hearing from God (Word), that celebrates Christ (Table) and that sends us into the world changed by our encounter with God (sending).”²⁵

Such an approach to planning worship is far different from the contemporary practice that focuses on engagement and inspiration. The contemporary church approach to worship as utilized in most Megachurches served as an important corrective to the traditional service that had no connection whatsoever to its mission context, but it has been all too easy to become market-driven rather than God-centered. North Point Community Church in Atlanta, emulated in churches around the country for its engaging and relevant worship services has actually produced a video parody, “Sunday is Coming,” that humorously depicts the marketing behind each element of the “cool” service. Its service movement begins with a big rocking song that “you know is cool because you’ve heard it on the radio,” followed by a cool young adult male who has a tattoo, followed by a song everyone knows, a video that frames the life-changing question of the day, followed by the person who has all the answers, coolly and casually presenting a message. The service concludes with a perfectly orchestrated song to

²⁴ Cherry, *Worship Architect*, 42-45.

²⁵ Cherry, *Worship Architect*, 27.

produce a tearful response.²⁶ This parody only works because it too accurately describes how many churches approach the purpose of worship: to get people in the seats and to get them to return. David Platt's critique that such worship and church strategy does not develop people into disciples of Christ is a well-timed challenge.²⁷

In a comprehensive checklist of worship planning questions, Cherry begins with this one: Is the service God-ward? Such a question is a good corrective to the market-driven approach. Yet, however we seek God's presence we must do it in ways that are accessible in language and style to those who are ready to move God-ward. Timothy Keller writes that if we are to be true to the mission that God has given the church then we must be willing to adapt and reformulate everything we do in worship, discipleship, community, and service in order to engage non-Christian society. Keller suggests that churches should *discourse in the vernacular*:

1. Assume people do not know biblical terms, so explain them.
2. Avoid tribal language, stylized prayer language, pious and ardent language meant to set a 'spiritual' tone.
3. Avoid we-them language and disdainful jokes or disrespectful or dismissive speech.
4. Avoid sentimental, pompous, or inspirational talk, using instead gentle, self-deprecating but joyful irony.
5. Avoid speaking as if non-believing people are not present.
6. All above suggestions must be an outflow of a humble-bold, gospel changed heart.²⁸

A thoughtful approach to worship that centers on God brings the church into God's presence. John Piper describes not the elements of a worship service but the final stage

²⁶“Sunday's Coming – Movie Trailer,” YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ys4Nx0rNlAM> (accessed April 25, 2011).

²⁷ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah: 2010), 90ff.

²⁸ Timothy Keller, “The Missional Church,” Redeemer Church, <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/missional.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2011).

of the experience of worship as “an encumbered joy in the manifold perfections of God – the joy of gratitude, wonder, hope, and admiration.”²⁹ It is this experience with God that transforms a church and its people, making their most defining characteristic the presence of God.

²⁹ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986), 75.

CHAPTER 4:

DISCPLESHIP

“I would like to visit your church sometime, but I’m kind of afraid to,” said John over the phone. My wife, a dental hygienist had recently had John as a patient, and when he found out that her husband was the pastor of the new church in town he volunteered that he had recently begun to read the Bible. He wanted to talk, so I called him.

“What would make you afraid,” I asked.

“I’m sort of scared about what happened to Paul, how much he has changed. He’s a different guy now.”

John was friends with Paul, who had recently become a follower of Christ. Paul was an intense and bright person, married with two children. We had met through our children’s basketball league, and through our friendship Paul had begun to attend church, investigating for the first time as an adult the faith that he had been taught as a child. The kind, gentle and intelligent witness of other people at the church had convinced Paul that the claims taught about Jesus in the Bible were true. His mind had been conquered, but now it was time for his will to submit to the leadership of Christ. He wrestled with what that would mean. He and his wife postponed buying a much larger house, upgrading their lifestyle. He wondered about what being a Christian would mean for his daily, recreational drug use. He had a remarkable garden in his backyard, terraced on a steep hill, where among all the vegetables he grew marijuana, which he sold to friends and neighbors, friends like John.

The day that Paul finally committed his life to Christ, his overwhelming thought was how clear, obvious and powerful was the love of God for him. Everything changed. His new joy in following Christ was contagious and irrepressible. He naturally began to invite family and friends over to his house to explain what he had discovered, or rather, whom he had discovered.

So, John knew Paul's story, and he was both attracted by it and scared of it. Paul had become a disciple of Jesus Christ and the result was unavoidable to those who knew him. It was not long before John and his family began to visit the church, and eventually John became a disciple of Christ, along with his family. Shortly, John's life as a disciple became contagious, attracting one of John's co-workers, Jim to the church. And the story was repeated. People were coming to a meaningful relationship with God as they became disciples of Jesus. As disciples, they were also making disciples.

People enter into a relationship with God in which they can truly be present to Him by becoming disciples of Jesus Christ. This principle of spiritual growth and development is based on two essential observations: (1) The life of Jesus presents the best model of spiritual integrity and of a person who was fully present to God, and totally devoted to God's purpose, and (2) Jesus' last instruction to his disciples was to go and make disciples who would be fully devoted to everything that Jesus taught (Matthew 28:18-20).

1. The life of Jesus. The Gospel of John states that Jesus, as the pre-existing, co-eternal Word of God uniquely enjoyed the presence of God (John 1:1). As the One and Only, he came from the Father, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). In becoming flesh, this One and Only, who had been present at the Father's side made God known (John 1:18). In other words, the entirety of Jesus' life and ministry proceeded from his relationship with God. As obvious as that is from John's account, it should not be lost as the defining factor in the life of Jesus. Even though

no other persons come from the Godhead, and could be described as pre-existent and co-eternal, there is still an essential principle to observe: the spiritual life we pursue must find its only explanation in the person and presence of God. Just as Jesus could explain his life only by pointing back to God, any disciple of his must be able to do the same. The difference is that we first point to Jesus as the one who has led us, taught us, and saved us for this purpose.

When Jesus was confronted by his critics, he could only explain his actions by his relationship to God, his Father. He said that he did nothing on his own, but only did what he had been taught by his Father (John 8:28). He lived in the consciousness of having been sent by the Father, and to do the Father's will gave him the greatest satisfaction (John 4:34).

Jesus is the best example of being present to God. His habit of prayer, devotion to every word that comes from God's mouth, total reliance on the Holy Spirit, dedication to serve others, and finally, his sacrificial death on the cross all set the standard for a life centered in God.

2. Jesus' last instruction. "Without doubt the most noteworthy feature of the teaching of Jesus was its quite extraordinary self-centeredness," writes John Stott.¹ Many examples would demonstrate this statement including the last instruction Jesus gave, what is usually referred to as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). One might have thought that Jesus' last instruction would be to repeat the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31), or some other formulation that boiled down to love God and serve others. Instead, his commission is to call others into a relationship with him as teacher and master.

This last instruction of Jesus makes it clear that a right relationship with God depends on a right relationship with Jesus, defined by being a disciple of Jesus. Jesus not only represents the model of a life present to God, he is the guide and teacher of that kind of life. Following his leadership becomes the essential factor of spiritual life.

The primary imperative of the Great Commission is not to be a disciple, but to make disciples. Discipleship is assumed. Dallas Willard, who is considered one of the primary thinkers and writers on discipleship, decries the lack of discipleship in western churches. In contrast to what is assumed in the Great Commission, Willard writes, "the governing assumption today, among professing Christians is that we can be 'Christians' forever and never become disciples."² He is concerned that churches are not doing the spiritual formation necessary to help people become disciples. "We do not practice spiritual formation. Churches have not designed their ministries to help people believe and behave differently because many church leaders have simply

¹John Stott, *Why I Am a Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 35.

²Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teaching on Discipleship* (New York: Harper One, 2006), xi.

gotten the message of Jesus wrong.”³ If this is the case, the problem is far worse than even Willard describes. The best outcome of a person’s life, according to the Great Commission is not just that one is a disciple, but that one is helping others become and be disciples. In other words, the goal is far more robust and aggressive than personal, spiritual maturity. Robert Coleman understands this greater ambition of discipleship when he suggests that a church’s evangelistic impact be judged by this question, “Do we see an ever-expanding company of dedicated men reaching the world with the Gospel as a result of our ministry?”⁴ “Reaching the world with the Gospel,” for Coleman is synonymous with making disciples.

Jesus promises that he will be with his disciples as they carry out this commission. Some may suggest that this commission is meant only for the eleven hearers and is relevant to apostles only, as those who have been sent, but a principle of restricting Jesus’ instructions only to those who were present would drastically reshape the Christian expectation about experiencing God at all. For instance, imagine if all of the teaching and instruction in the Upper Room Discourse of John 13-17 were to be restricted only to those in the room. Consider all that would be lost if only the apostles were to love one another as the Lord has loved them, if the heavenly home that Jesus promised to prepare was for them only, if the way to the Father was open only for them, if the promised Holy Spirit would be a Counselor to none but them. All are not merely to be disciples, but are to be engaged in making disciples.

David Platt makes the same point when he challenges the tendency to think of the Great Commission as limited to the obligation of just a few. He includes the global scope of this instruction.

We take Jesus’ command in Matthew 28 to make disciples of all nations, and we say, “That means other people.” But we look at Jesus command in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” and we say, “Now, that means me.” We take Jesus’ promise in Acts 1:8 that the Spirit will lead us to the ends of the earth, and we say, “That means some people.” But we take Jesus’ promise in John 10:10 that we will have abundant life, and we say, “That means me.”

In the process we have unnecessarily (and unbiblically) drawn a line of distinction, assigning the obligation of Christianity to a few while keeping the privileges of Christianity for us all.⁵

The point is, or at least a question may be, “Would discipleship be more of a reality if the fuller expectation of equipping all to make disciples was the focus?”

³ The Leadership Interview, “The Apprentices,” *Leadership*, Summer 2006, 20.

⁴ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977), 11.

⁵ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010), 73.

CURRENT ASSESSMENTS

Reading current literature on the quality of Christian discipleship, at least in western churches suggests that the church is in a crisis. Reggie McNeal writes, “Church culture in North America is a vestige of the original (Christian) movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle match theirs.”⁶ There is not much hint of authentic discipleship in such a judgment. Alan and Debra Hirsch write, “We sincerely believe discipleship has become a frontier issue for the people of God at this time in history. And most commentators would agree that in sincerely seeking to appeal to the prevailing consumerist culture, the western church has all but lost the art of discipleship.”⁷ Craig Groeschel goes even further, suggesting that we are learning to live like “Christian Atheists.” Christian Atheism is “where people believe in God but live as if he doesn’t exist.”⁸ Groeschel is transparent about his own experience and writes, “You might think it’s odd for a pastor to struggle with living like there is no God. However, in my corner of the world, Christian Atheism is a fast spreading spiritual pandemic.”⁹ I was once asked by the leaders of a humanist Ethical Culture group to participate in a debate about the existence of God. I agreed to on the condition that the leaders would have lunch with me so that we might get to know each other. During our lunch they described themselves as intellectually

⁶ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 1.

⁷ Alan and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 23.

⁸ Craig Groeschel, *The Christian Atheist* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 14.

⁹ Groeschel, *Christian Atheist*, 14.

agnostic, but practically atheist. I instantly wondered how true that would be for many professing Christians, if not atheists, at least deists in practice.

In 2007, Willow Creek made news through its *Reveal* study that indicated in a quantitative manner that its activities and programs were not producing the hoped-for level of spiritual transformation in its members. Critics immediately seized upon the opportunity to describe this as Willow's "confession" that they had been wrong about the strategy that they had promoted to churches for years.¹⁰ Instead of a confession it was more of a demonstration of a church willing to be honest about what it needs to learn. Pastor Bill Hybels wrote, "the local church I've been the pastor of for more than three decades was not doing as well as we thought when it came to spiritual growth."¹¹ The fact that one of the most emulated churches in America was willing to pause, assess, and acknowledge that discipleship was not happening as hoped among its members raised the issue for many congregations.

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE HISTORY OF RENEWAL

The history of the church offers both encouragement and challenge for a proper expectation of a vibrant discipleship that transforms individuals, churches and society. Much can be learned about spiritual integrity from the

¹⁰ Note Alan and Debra Hirsch's description: "The report acknowledges that what they've been doing for those many years and what they've taught millions of others to do is not producing solid disciples of Jesus Christ – numbers, yes, but disciples, no." *Untamed*, 110-111.

¹¹ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal* (South Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 3.

history of times of vitality. Richard Lovelace's massive work on spiritual renewal documents the ebb and flow of spiritual renewal throughout the centuries of the church. He notes, "As early as the Montanist movement of the second century, the concept of decline and renewal in the church appears."¹² The observation is not meant to make the church passive about whatever is its current state, but rather make it desperate for the type of renewal that ensures the best developments in Christian life. Reading primary documents from periods of great renewal and awakening informs the church of the aims and hopes of discipleship. As John Wesley read Jonathan Edwards' *Faithful Narrative* and was inspired to not only imagine something different than the status quo, but to become absolutely dedicated to spiritual renewal, so church leaders today should be challenged to be part of a new discipleship reality. Periods of renewal highlight what could be in respect to spiritual growth.

Lovelace identifies two pre-conditions of renewal that some would say are conspicuously absent from current spiritual life emphases: an awareness of God's holiness and love, and an awareness of the depth of sin in the human experience.¹³ Richard Foster, writing on spiritual formation argues that churches have replaced worship with entertainment and that there is no room for the awe-inspiring presence of God.¹⁴ It is difficult for Christians to apprehend the holiness of God or the depth of sin when the aim of the service seems to be geared for high-energy inspiration. Add to this the charge of consumerism that is often attached to the current church and the scene seems

¹² Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 32.

¹³ Lovelace, *Dynamics*, 75.

¹⁴ Richard Foster, "Spiritual Formation Agenda," *Christianity Today*, January 2007, 31.

too upbeat for the more sobering aspects of true discipleship. David Platt writes:

The gospel reveals eternal realities about God that we would rather not face. We prefer to sit back, enjoy our clichés, and picture God as a Father who might help us, all the while ignoring God as a Judge who might damn us. Maybe that is why we fill our lives with the constant drivel of entertainment in our culture – and in the church. We are afraid that if we stop and really look at God in his Word, we might discover that he evokes greater awe and demands deeper worship than we are ready to give him.¹⁵

For many, Christ has become a therapist rather than the Master. It is difficult, if not impossible to experience the key aspects of discipleship if one's beginning experience with God is not on the right track. Lovelace identifies the following as primary elements of spiritual renewal:

1. Justification: You are accepted.
2. Sanctification: You are free from bondage to sin.
3. The indwelling Spirit: You are not alone.
4. Authority in Spiritual Conflict: You have authority.¹⁶

Justification does not mean much apart from an awareness of God's holiness and our depth of sin. Sanctification certainly is irrelevant unless one recognizes the bondage of sin. The experience with brokenness necessary for discipleship is often found more in twelve-step programs for alcoholics and addicts than in church.¹⁷

¹⁵ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010), 29.

¹⁶ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal*, 75.

¹⁷ Some of my most mature Christian friends, seasoned and trained through decades of church, claim that their recent years in Alcoholics Anonymous have been more transformative for their spiritual growth than anything previously experienced. Another friend says that the faith he has witnessed in his sexual addiction recovery group is unlike anything he has ever seen in church. These groups function somewhat like the small groups set up by John Wesley in 18th-century England in respect to their honesty with sin and holiness.

Charles Finney is characterized as the revivalist who emphasized human effort instead of the sovereignty of God for the producing of renewal. “Revival is not dependent on a miracle in any sense. It is a result we can logically expect from the right use of God-given means, as much as any other effect produced by applying tools and resources.”¹⁸ One understands his point of view differently when considering that the spiritual environment surrounding his conversion was marked by a passive, hyper-Calvinism. Also, when it is noted that the first means of producing revival are all centered in prayer, one will not conclude that Finney would ever credit human effort for revival. The primary way to promote revival is to first break up the “fallow ground” of sinful and hardened hearts.¹⁹ Finney would never recommend that greater discipleship be generated with more inspiring programs. The starting lesson from renewal history would be for a honest reckoning of the need for brokenness and a humble dependence upon God for the guidance and power to know and do the right things.

Other lessons from renewal history help shape our expectations regarding spiritual vitality. What best frames our hopes as well as our direction in pursuing a reality that produces disciples?

James Packer has produced a helpful list of renewal elements that could be used as a standard for discerning renewal. He suggests that biblical renewal includes the following:

1. Awareness of God’s presence.
2. Responsiveness to God’s Word.

¹⁸ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures On Revival* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1988), 13.

¹⁹ Finney, *Lectures*, 29.

3. Sensitiveness to Sin.
4. Liveliness in Community.
5. Fruitfulness in Testimony.²⁰

Note the dimensions of these elements. The first three are God-focused, from God's direction. The fourth reflects the connectedness of the church and may be more internal and the fifth reflects an overflow to the world. Both Lovelace and Packer, learning from church history, begin to frame a profile of what a disciple looks like.

Recent research has also indicated that churches that have a simple and clear process for making disciples are more effective than those that do not. This finding sounds obvious, but the point of the research done by Thomas Reiner and Eric Geigner is to challenge churches that are complex in their programming and activity level. The study compared growing churches with those that were not growing and found that churches that had a simple process for reaching and maturing people were expanding the kingdom. "Conversely, complex churches are struggling and anemic. Churches without a process or with a complicated process for making disciples are floundering. As a whole, cluttered and complicated churches are not alive."²¹ Churches that attempt to do everything possible in ministry lose their way, perhaps becoming busy places of activity, but not places of spiritual transformation.

A simple church is defined as "a congregation designed around a straight-forward, and strategic process that moves people through the stages of

²⁰ James I. Packer, *God in Our Midst: Seeking and Receiving Ongoing Renewal* (Ann Arbor, MI: Victor Books, 1997), 24-32.

²¹ Thomas S. Rainer and Eric Geigner, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 14.

spiritual growth.”²² The process is not complicated or confusing, easy to grasp, and understood by all. Complexity is not welcomed or accepted.

It is possible to read this material as a pragmatic attempt to help churches market themselves better and build their brand more effectively. However, the goal is discipleship. “The goal is to partner with God to move people through the stages of spiritual growth. Changed lives are the bottom line, the intended end result. Christ formed in people is the goal.”²³ To this end the researches discovered four elements in the simple churches that seemed to be effective: clarity, movement, alignment, and focus.²⁴

Clarity happens when leaders can communicate the discipleship process in such a way that all can understand it. Some churches are unable to communicate the process because they do not have one. So, step one is to define the process. A church is able to define its process when it: (1) determines what kind of disciple it should produce, (2) describe its purpose as a process, and (3) decides how each weekly program is part of the process. Regarding what kind of disciples, it seems odd to imagine that there are options, but what is meant is more about how a disciple may be described. Their example is of a church that wants disciples who are “passionate lovers of God, servants in the kingdom of God, and connected in vibrant relationships to people.”²⁵ After the process is defined, to achieve clarity the process must be illustrated graphically, and the participation must be measured. At this point, the suggestions seem a bit more like retail strategy than discipleship strategy.

²² Rainer and Geigner, *Simple Church*, 60.

²³ Rainer and Geigner, *Simple Church*, 62.

²⁴ Rainer and Geigner, *Simple Church*, 69.

²⁵ Rainer and Geigner, *Simple Church*, 115.

Jesus did count the disciples when he met with them in the upper room, but it is hard to imagine him keeping measurements on crowds, healings, deliverances, and such. However, the point should be well taken that many churches do not clearly know their discipleship process, and even if they do, they may not have ways to evaluate its effectiveness.

Movement focuses on seeing if transformation is taking place in people who are engaged in the discipleship process. Their emphasis on movement is based on several assumptions. First, that greater involvement represents greater commitment and growth. Willow's *Reveal* study brought this assumption into question. Secondly, that programmed activities can be designed for the transformation process. The example is given of the church that describes its process as love God, love others, love the world. The worship service, which represents the largest percentage of attendance would be the love-God step, small groups the love-others step, and some kind of ministry team activity the love-the-world step. There is certainly value to this approach, although it seems too neat and tidy, to which objection it would be claimed that all that is being done is reporting on the research of effective churches. It is the case that the worship is usually the first step for people considering faith, but for many there are prior steps, based on other ministry opportunities.

Alignment is an emphasis to make sure that the church's resources and energies are spent on the few activities that support the process. Alignment is especially important for pastors and staff. Accountability must be established to ensure alignment. A busy children's pastor who was engaged in many activities, keeping several programs afloat, was asked, "What is the most

important children's program for the life of the church?" He was unable to answer, citing important reasons for the existence of each program, especially the ones in which he was most personally invested. Alignment can only be achieved when there is clarity about the process, because clarity produces the priorities.

Focus, somewhat like alignment mostly helps a church know what not to do. Churches are tempted to empower both their leaders and members by engaging every new idea that comes up. One church with which I was familiar was proud of its approach to lay involvement and ministry innovation. "We don't provide the structure for ministry development. We just see what paths our members tread and then we pave." If this pastor had ever driven in Boston on roads patterned from the trails set by cows, he would most likely have a different approach to such a passive leadership.

The value of the Simple Church research comes from the determination to clearly ask the question, "What?" and "How?" when it comes to making disciples. There are others who are addressing the same question, but in different ways. The next two chapters will consider some of the different approaches.

CHAPTER 5:

APPROACHES TO MAKING DISCIPLES I

Those who have described the dire need to refocus the church in the area of discipleship do so in order to suggest approaches to making disciples. A survey of some approaches that are different in scope, emphasis and style may help construct a direction that helps a church develop not just disciples, but disciple-makers. The approaches surveyed will include that of Richard Foster on spiritual formation, Dallas Willard and John Ortberg on discipleship, Randy Frazee on the Christian Spiritual Life Profile, Willow Creek on “Follow Me,” their new direction based on the *Reveal* study, and Alan and Debra Hirsch and David Platt, who represent the challenges of young evangelical leaders.

Before examining these approaches, one common assumption should be identified: the goal of spiritual formation, discipleship, spiritual growth, and transformation can be summarized in one word – Christ-likeness. There is no dispute or variance in the hoped-for outcome. Every approach aims for the same thing, for the life of Jesus Christ to be reproduced in his followers. Richard Foster, referencing the lessons from saints of previous centuries writes, “Yet, echoing through the centuries is a company of witnesses telling us of a life vastly richer and deeper and fuller. In all walks of life and in all human situations, they have found a life of ‘righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 14:17). They have discovered that real, solid, substantive

transformation into the likeness of Christ is possible.”¹ Of Willard it is written that he “appeals to those haunted by the question: *Why don’t Christians look more like Christ?*”² Willow Creek defines the goal of every leader as, “to guide followers in the footsteps of Jesus.”³ “Jesus is our primary model, teacher, guide, savior, and Lord. He is the standard by which we assess discipleship and spirituality. And we must become living versions of him – little Jesuses,” write Alan and Debra Hirsch.⁴

The word, “disciple,” itself makes the goal clear: to be a learner so that one can become like the teacher. Willard writes that, “The New Testament is a book about disciples by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ.”⁵ However, the way to reach that goal of making disciples who can make disciples is approached in different ways.

RICHARD FOSTER AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A little over thirty years ago, according to one writer, most evangelicals were not at all familiar with the subject of spiritual disciplines. If they were, they most likely attached a negative works-righteousness association with the historic practices. Richard Foster is credited with recovering the spiritual disciplines with his landmark book in 1978, *Celebration of Discipline*.⁶ Soon,

¹ Richard Foster, “Spiritual Formation Agenda,” *Christianity Today*, January 2007, 29.

² The Leadership Interview, *Leadership*, Summer 2006, 20.

³ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Follow Me.* (South Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2009), 7.

⁴ Alan and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 37.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission, Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 3.

⁶ Mark Galli, “A Life Formed in the Spirit,” *Christianity Today*, September 2008, 41.

thereafter, he founded *Renovare*, a non-profit movement dedicated to providing resources to encourage spiritual renewal in individuals and churches. “We seek to resource, fuel, model and advance more intentional living and spiritual formation among Christians and those wanting a deeper connection with God.”⁷

His approach begins with a recognition that people have a spiritual reality that needs shaping and development by the regular exercise of proven disciplines. “We are all spiritual beings. We have physical bodies, but our lives are largely driven by an unseen part of us. There is an immaterial center in us that shapes the way we see the world and ourselves, directs the choices we make, and guides our actions. Our spirit is the most important part of who we are. And yet we rarely spend time developing our inner life. That's what spiritual formation is all about.”⁸

Intentionality applied to certain practices within relationships with others form the basis of this approach to discipleship. The practices are those demonstrated by Jesus. “The practices of Jesus have been recognized for centuries as the core activities of the spiritual life. In the same way a runner is equipped to compete in a marathon by the discipline of physical training, so training through spiritual disciplines frees us to live each day with the “easy yoke” and “light burden” Jesus spoke of (Matt 11:30).”⁹ These practices are:

⁷ “What is Renovare?” Renovare, <http://www.renovare.us/WHOWEARE/WhatisRenovar%C3%A9/tabid/2475/Default.aspx> (accessed April 25, 2011).

⁸ “What is Spiritual Formation?” Renovare, <http://www.renovare.us/SPIRITUALRENEWAL/WhyBecomeLikeJesus/Whatisspiritualformation/tabid/2572/Default.aspx> (accessed February 10, 2011).

⁹ “Practicing Like Jesus,” Renovare, <http://www.renovare.us/SPIRITUALRENEWAL/PracticingLikeJesus/WhyPracticeLikeJesus/tabid/2518/Default.aspx> (accessed April 25, 2011).

1. Meditation: The ability to hear God's voice and obey his word.
2. Prayer: the interactive conversation with God about what we are doing.
3. Fasting: The voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity.
4. Study: The mind talking on an order conforming to the order of whatever we concentrate upon.
5. Simplicity: An inward reality that results in an outward life style.
6. Solitude: An open relational space for being found by God and freed from competing loyalties.
7. Service: The many little deaths of going beyond ourselves which produces in us the virtue of humility.
8. Confession: Experiencing the grace and mercy of God for healing the sins and sorrows of the past.
9. Worship: Entering into the supra-natural experience of the Shekanah, or glory of God.
10. Guidance: Knowing in daily life an interactive friendship with God.¹⁰

These practices are experiential and that is the point, what Foster describes as "an interactive communion with God." "We begin to develop a habit of divine orientation."¹¹ Foster's Quaker background is certainly apparent in his own orientation, but it is a helpful corrective to the busy, frenetic Christian who stays out of touch with God in any real way.

Even though any practices can become routine and mechanical, it is difficult to imagine Christian Atheism being a possibility in this approach.

¹⁰ "Practicing Like Jesus," Renovare.

<http://www.renovare.us/SPIRITUALRENEWAL/PracticingLikeJesus/WhyPracticeLikeJesus/tabid/2518/Default.aspx> (accessed April 25, 2011).

¹¹ Foster, *Christianity Today*, 31.

Yet, there are three necessary cautions. The first is that such a deeply experiential approach can lead to a self-absorbed introspection that is not healthy. The person becomes obsessed with how one is doing. Secondly, a person may develop expectations of spiritual growth that may be too high to be realized. Foster explains that the result is not ecstasy, but serenity, but not all temperaments experience even serenity in the same way. So, there is potential for the disciplines to foster chronic disappointment. Thirdly, if one does grow and recognize it, pride may be an issue.

Foster believes that these cautions can be met with a balanced approach to spiritual formation. The unique way that Foster promotes balance is to identify six major movements in church history that if observed will build a balanced approach to discipleship. This reliance on church history and the practices of previous generations is a strength of Foster's approach to discipleship. This balance can best be achieved by participating in small groups dedicated to spiritual formation. Foster identifies the six movements as the following:

1. *The Contemplative Stream*: Modeled on the example of the 4th century Desert Fathers in respect to prayer (not in respect to reclusive asceticism), this emphasis produces a *prayer-filled life*.
2. *The Holiness Stream*: Following the example of John Wesley and the Methodists of the 18th century, this movement leads to the *virtuous life*.
3. *The Charismatic Stream*: George Fox and the Quakers of the 17th century, with an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit expresses this direction towards the *Spirit-empowered life*.
4. *The Social Justice Stream*: Saint Francis of Assisi in the 12th century is the inspiration for developing the *compassionate life*.

5. *The Evangelical Stream*: The emphasis on Scripture and evangelism marked by Martin Luther in the 16th century is the model for the *Word-centered life*.
6. *The Incarnational Stream*: Count von Zinzendorf and the Moravians in the 18th century are the examples of the *sacramental life*.¹²

This delineation of the possible ways to grow spiritually is helpful in understanding what may be a strength in a person's approach as well as what may be a blind spot. For instance, evangelicals who sometimes risk becoming almost deistic in their reliance on Scripture (God has spoken and all we need is to become experts on the manual), have been challenged to grow in areas related to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the need for social justice.

Even though Foster attempts to operationalize these varied emphases in spiritual formation, the irony is that Renovare and its approach to discipleship is primarily contemplative. The strength of the Foster approach to becoming like Jesus has been its focus on the interior life. When one attends a Renovare conference, the primary actions are devoted to learning about the interior life and prayer. The streams are identified, but conferences are not set up for practices related to the other movements. Nonetheless, Foster's approach to discipleship is a necessary corrective to modern attempts to mass-produce disciples with needs-oriented programming that does little to shape the life of a person. There has been an explosion of interest in spirituality in western culture in the last several decades, and Foster's approach does much to recover the true spirituality of Christian faith and practice.

¹² James Bryan Smith and Lynda L. Graybeal, *The Spiritual Formation Workbook* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 27-29.

Christians are desperate to learn how to pray and how to be deeply connected to God. A few years ago I led my church to organize a forty-day, twenty-four hour prayer experience where people were asked to come to a room and pray for an hour. The church's conference room with its board-like table and executive chairs was transformed into a sacred space of multiple prayer areas. People were invited to sign up online, come to the room, leave their shoes outside, and spend the hour praying however they liked. I must admit that I wondered if the hours would be filled. Over 650 people participated from all ages and over 1600 hours of prayer were logged over the 969 hour period. There was never a time when there were not shoes outside the door. People outside of the church heard about it and participated. Policemen on break in the middle of the night would come by and ask to pray. College students would leave parties to come to pray. I especially challenged men who could not imagine spending five minutes alone in prayer to participate. A businessman reported that he had signed up because his pastor said to, came, entered the room, and wondered what he would do for a whole hour. Suddenly, he was overcome with such a strong sense of the presence of God that he spent most of the time weeping as God uncovered deep areas of pain in his life. Most anticipated the time as representing an opportunity for heroic, world-changing intercession. Nearly all reported that most of the time was spent with being drawn into God's presence, learning to connect with God.

The best outcome of Richard Foster's approach to discipleship is to recover the interior-life practices of the life of Jesus.

DALLAS WILLARD AND JOHN ORTBERG

Dallas Willard and Richard Foster are so strongly linked in their approach to discipleship that it may be difficult, and perhaps unnecessary to make any distinction. Willard was a member and the song leader of the first church that Foster served as pastor, and is a regular Renovare speaker and contributor, and like Foster emphasizes the spiritual disciplines. Yet, Willard has his own unique influence and challenge to the church in respect to discipleship. John Ortberg has been influenced by both Willard and Foster and represents someone who has been able to popularize Willard's emphases. Ortberg remarks that a working title for one of his books could have been *Dallas for Dummies*.¹³ Willard and Ortberg represent an approach to discipleship that combines the depth of the emphases of spiritual formation and the breadth of real life application.

This approach begins with the understanding common to all approaches that what it means to be a Christian is to be a disciple. Willard makes the point that the word "disciple" occurs 269 times in the New Testament, while the word "Christian" occurs three times.¹⁴ He criticizes the tendency to center the Christian life on believing the right things so that one can go to heaven. "For evangelicals the turn to discipleship represents a growing awareness that they have too often promoted a gospel reductionism, focusing primarily on conversion and eternal salvation and neglecting a way of life here and now."¹⁵

¹³ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 12.

¹⁴ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 3.

¹⁵ Anthony B. Robinson, "'Follow Me:' The Renewed Focus on Discipleship," *Christian Century*, September 4, 2007, 23.

Willard believes that there needs to be a wider application and experience of salvation. “Why is it that we look upon our salvation as the moment that began our religious life instead of the daily life we receive from God?,” Willard asks.¹⁶ The benefits of salvation are to be experienced routinely in real life, albeit real life that is being transformed.

Willard rejects any notion that discipleship is for the exceptional Christian. “The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian – especially pastured, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way.¹⁷ Willard wonders what else a person might have better to do than to become like Jesus through discipleship.¹⁸

Willard defines a disciple as an “apprentice” of Jesus. “I like the word apprentice because it means I’m with Jesus learning to do what he did. When you look at the first disciples, that’s what they were doing. They watched Jesus and listened to him, and then he said, “Now you do it.”¹⁹ Intentionality is essential to being an apprentice, and the intent comes from a desire and a decision to learn from Jesus in order that one may become like him.

Assumed is an active, living relationship with Jesus. Many Christians have what might be described as a historical relationship with Jesus, like one might have with any figure in history. It may be possible to accept all of the life principles of someone but still not have the kind of living relationship that is possible with Jesus, the Risen Lord. Along with this assumption is the

¹⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 28.

¹⁷ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 3.

¹⁸ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 7.

¹⁹ The Leadership Interview, “The Apprentices,” *Leadership*, Summer 2005, 22.

expectation that as an apprentice it is possible to do what Jesus said, for instance to be wise enough to build one's house on the rock of Jesus' words (Matthew 7:24-25). "These words from Jesus show that it must be possible to hear and do what he said. It also must be possible to train his apprentices in such a way that they routinely do everything he said was best."²⁰ Indeed, the only way to experience the abundant life that Jesus promised is to live in obedience to what he taught. Obedience can only come from training, so careful thought must be given to training apprentices.

In determining the objectives of this training, Willard identifies four results that are not the objectives:

1. External conformity to the wording of Jesus' teaching.
2. Profession of perfectly correct doctrine.
3. Faithful attendance to church activities.
4. Certain states of mind or ecstatic experiences.²¹

History has proven that these outcomes to discipleship are not the same things as being Christ-like.

In contrast, Willard identifies two primary objectives: *love and delight* in the heavenly Father revealed by Jesus, and the breaking of automatic patterns of resistance to the kingdom of God. The order of these objectives is important, because to the degree that one experiences the love and grace of God, one will be more inclined to reset the default patterns of thought and action that are contrary to God's purpose. "When the mind is filled with this

²⁰ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 311.

²¹ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 316.

great and beautiful God, the ‘natural’ response, once all ‘inward’ hindrances are removed, will be to do everything I have told you to do.”²²

To pursue these objectives requires the training that can only come through the practice of spiritual disciplines. A discipline is anything we can do by our effort to affect a development that cannot otherwise occur.²³ These disciplines are never to be confused with works that earn salvation or a greater position with God. Their practice does not violate grace, but applies it. “In most churches we’re not only saved by grace, we’re paralyzed by it. We’re afraid to do anything that might be a ‘work.’ People need to see that action is a receptacle for grace, not a substitute.”²⁴

There are two categories of spiritual disciplines, according to Willard’s approach: abstinence and positive engagement. Disciplines that express abstinence are: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice. Positive engagement disciplines include study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission.²⁵

A person dedicated to the practice of these disciplines should experience progress in Five Kingdom Dimensions.

1. Confidence in and reliance upon Jesus.
2. Desire to be his apprentice.
3. Obedience.
4. Pervasive transformation in heart and soul.

²² Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 319.

²³ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 353.

²⁴ The Leadership Interview, *Leadership*, 22.

²⁵ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 158.

5. Power to work the works of the kingdom.²⁶

As inspiring and biblically-faithful as Willard's apprentice approach to discipleship may be, there is a danger that it can be too abstract; sound in principle and theology, but not necessarily easy to comprehend and apply. To some it may sound as if a philosophy professor constructed it, which is exactly the case.²⁷ It is at this point that John Ortberg becomes relevant as a proponent of Willard's approach. As a pastor and author, Ortberg takes Willard's principles of intentionality, apprenticeship, and the practice of spiritual disciplines and makes them more accessible to Christians who want to grow. It is not the case that Willard's material needs to be "dumbed down," but in language and focus made more accessible. Ironically, even though Willard argues against an exceptional approach to biblical discipleship, his presentation can, nonetheless be exceptional in who it might engage. People tend to favor exceptional authorities when it comes to faith, but transformative practice may better occur when the guide seems more like "one of us." Ortberg excels at being "one of us."

In *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*, Ortberg begins with the recognition by many people that their lives are not fulfilling their best purpose. "I am in a sense of disappointment. I am missing the life that I was appointed by God to live – missing my calling."²⁸ Those who are not Christians may as well have this sense of disappointment. A person who had become a friend after visiting the church I served was very

²⁶ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 367.

²⁷ Willard is a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California.

²⁸ Ortberg, *Living the Life*, 14.

antagonistic about the faith claims of Christianity. Every conversation would go to angry complaints about Christianity. At one point, I invited him to drop the subject altogether if it bothered him so much. His response was very informative. “I think that probably my life is supposed to have more of a purpose than just getting up, going to work, coming home, going to bed, getting up going to work, and on and on.”

Ortberg, like Willard rejects a narrow view of salvation, arguing that the object is life-change. “The primary goal of spiritual life is human transformation. It is not making sure people know where they’re going after they die, or helping them have a richer interior life, or seeing that they have lots of information about the Bible, although these can be good things.”²⁹

The spiritual disciplines are defined by the concept of training rather than that of just trying harder. “Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely.”³⁰ The popularity of physical training provides an ample illustration. Trying hard to run a marathon is pointless, even dangerous, if one has not trained for it with incremental disciplines. Many Christians get discouraged in their Christian life because they try harder rather than learn to train.

There are several ways that Ortberg supplements Willard’s approach to the disciplines. First, Ortberg is experiential in understanding the disciplines. For instance, he begins with the discipline of celebration, focusing on our experience with joy, or lack of joy. “Joy is a command. Joylessness is a

²⁹ Ortberg, *Living the Life*, 21.

³⁰ Ortberg, *Living the Life*, 47.

serious sin, one that religious people are particularly prone to indulge in. It may be the sin most readily tolerated by the church.”³¹ The experience of joy is rooted in the theology of the nature of God. “Joy is at the heart of God, himself.”³² Many Christians operate as if God is without joy, so overcome by the sins of the people he created, that he is more characterized by disappointment, like a distant, disapproving father. It is a surprise to many, as it was to the prodigal son, that the outcome is meant to be a banquet. Ortberg does an excellent job of keeping the perspective of God’s joy in view as related to spiritual transformation.

In his most recent book, *The Me I Want to Be: Becoming God’s Best Version of You*, Ortberg adds a variation to discipleship and spiritual formation by identifying the principle of personal uniqueness. Even though there is a danger here of discipleship devolving into self-help type therapy, psychology and modernity’s obsession with individuality, it is helpful to apply discipleship practices to the varieties of personalities we represent.³³ The argument is that God has made us all differently, with different abilities, passions, experiences, wiring, callings, and other unique feature. The application is that we must learn how we best grow. “God never grows two people the same way. God is a hand-crafter – not a mass producer.”³⁴ This recognition of differences is somewhat in the vein of Foster’s recognition of different streams, but it is more

³¹ Ortberg, *Living the Life*, 69.

³² Ortberg, *Living the Life*, 65.

³³ Ortberg’s titles do sound like self-help manuals, most likely based on editor’s choices to market the books. Ortberg’s approach actually illustrates the principle of differences in personality, gifts, and callings. Ortberg is able to do what, for instance, John Piper could never do, and vice versa.

³⁴ John Ortberg, *The Me I Want To Be* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 49.

developed in psychology. In Ortberg's approach, discipleship includes discovering our uniqueness and how God wants to continue to shape us into Christ-likeness through that uniqueness. An interesting application that Ortberg suggests is that in the area of temptation we each have a "signature sin" that usually reflects our strengths. Quoting Michael Mangis who coined the term, Ortberg links our greatest temptations to our greatest gift. Mangis identifies nine gift/temptation patterns by using the "enmeagram," an ancient system used in a variety of cultures.³⁵ This delineation can certainly seem far afield of biblical discipleship but still offers helpful insights. An example of one of the nine gift patterns is that of Achievers:

Achievers love to conquer challenges and perform before others. At their best, they are motivated to grow, stretch, and learn. They can inspire and move people to action, and they often like to be in front of crowds. Giving a talk, which is the most common fear in America, often energizes them. If they don't have a chance to develop and shine, they will lose motivation. Achievers want to make an impact on the world around them.

The temptation is that they can live for their image, idolizing their own performance. Unredeemed, they will be prone to measure their success in terms of applause and recognition.³⁶

Some may think that Ortberg incorporates too much non-biblical, cultural material into his approach to spiritual formation, but Ortberg's aim is deeply rooted in a God-centered life. The recognition of differences in people helps overcome stereotypical pictures of spiritual learning. One organization that is building its discipleship methodology on this recognition is *Monvee*, an online, interactive spiritual growth program. Using a personalized assessment

³⁵Ortberg, *Me*, 148.

³⁶ Ortberg, *Me*, 149.

to identify a person's primary learning style, Monvee then develops a suggested growth plan of a variety of activities. It tracks these activities and updates suggestions. The plan can also be coordinated with the person's church in such a way that church programs may be designed as some of the activities. The point is to use current technology to support a customized growth plan.³⁷

Ortberg recommends this plan, but whatever a person does to intentionally pursue discipleship, the goal is to stay in "the flow of the Spirit," being guided and shaped by God's Spirit. As an example in the spiritual discipline of prayer, Ortberg writes, "The goal of prayer is to live all of my life and speak all of my words in the joyful awareness of the presence of God."³⁸ So, the outcome is a life that is truly and consistently present to God.

So far, the approaches represented by Foster, Willard, and Ortberg have focused mostly on a highly reflective life, employing the spiritual disciplines. Others take those emphases and become more pragmatic about measuring spiritual growth. Still others begin with a recognition that there are some major obstacles to spiritual growth that must first be identified and confronted.

³⁷ Monvee, <http://www.monvee.com/> (accessed February 12, 2011).

³⁸ Ortberg, *Me*, 134.

CHAPTER 6:

APPROACHES TO MAKING DISCIPLES II

Some discipleship efforts are based on a pragmatic and entrepreneurial approach to spiritual formation. They will include the spiritual disciplines but will be more quantitatively oriented. Willow Creek represents the most researched approach, but Randy Frazee has designed a plan that is based on measuring growth. At the same time, younger leaders are beginning to find their voice and influence. Their distinction is their starting point of deconstructing the current church culture in respect to spiritual formation. There are important lessons to be learned from them all.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE PROFILE ASSESSMENT

One approach to discipleship and spiritual growth is to measure growth and plan according to where one might be in respect to the ideal. Dallas Willard says that churches usually measure the wrong things when it comes to spiritual growth, but he recommends a profile developed by Randy Frazee.¹ Frazee asks this question as the basis for the assessment that he developed: “Do people see a profile of Jesus Christ when they see your life?”²

Thirty “core competencies” of the Christ-like life are identified, against which a person will measure their growth. There are ten competencies each on beliefs, practices, and virtues.

¹ Staff Interview, “How Do We Assess Spiritual Growth,” *Leadership*, Spring 2010, 29.

² Randy Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile: Assessment Workbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 9.

The Core Beliefs

- 1. Trinity:** I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- 2. Salvation by Grace:** I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
- 3. Authority of the Bible:** I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.
- 4. Personal God:** I believe that God is involved in and cares about my daily life.
- 5. Identity in Christ:** I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.
- 6. Church:** I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish his purpose on earth today.
- 7. Humanity:** I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- 8. Compassion:** I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.
- 9. Eternity:** I believe there is a heaven and a hell, and I believe Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and establish his eternal kingdom.
- 10. Stewardship:** I believe everything I am or own belongs to God.

The Core Practices

- 1. Worship:** I worship God for who he is and what he has done for me.
- 2. Prayer:** I pray to God to know him, to lay my requests before him, and to find direction for my daily life.
- 3. Bible Study:** I study the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.
- 4. Single-mindedness:** I focus on God and his priorities for my life.
- 5. Biblical Community:** I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.
- 6. Spiritual Gifts:** I know and use my spiritual gifts to fulfill God's purposes.

7. Giving Away My Time: I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

8. Giving Away My Money: I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

9. Giving Away My Faith: I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

10. Giving Away My Life: I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

The Core Virtues

1. Love: I sacrificially and unconditionally love others.

2. Joy: I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

3. Peace: I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

4. Patience: I take a long time to overheat, and I endure patiently the unavoidable pressures of life.

5. Kindness/Goodness: I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

6. Faithfulness: I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to that relationship.

7. Gentleness: I am thoughtful, considerate, and calm in dealing with others.

8. Self-control: I have power, through Christ, to control myself.

9. Hope: I can cope with the hardships of life and death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

10. Humility: I choose to esteem others above myself.³

³ Frazee, *Profile*, 14-19.

To do the assessment, persons score themselves on a series of statements on a scale from 1-5. For example, the statement, “I believe that God loves me even when I do not obey him,” indicates where a person might be in the belief about their identity in Christ. The workbook also includes several tear-out assessments that can be completed by family members and close friends.

Once the totals are determined in each core competency, a person can decide which areas to target for growth. A planning guide is provided as well as suggested resources, and a discussion guide for small groups.

The strength of the profile is that in its attempt to quantify spiritual maturity it identifies essentials in faith and practice. Churches may identify core beliefs in a statement of faith, and perhaps some practices in a membership covenant, but most do not have as comprehensive understanding of the desired outcomes of discipleship. Yet, when one attempts to identify essentials it is difficult not to conform to most recent theological and historical issues. The beliefs of this profile certainly reflect a Reformation-centered system, and probably defy the Reformation motto, *ecclesia semper reformans, semper reformanda* (“the church always reformed, always reforming”). None of the beliefs are objectionable to an evangelical faith, but to some they may be too Enlightenment-style rationalistic. For instance, a current day disciple who has struggled with addiction might resonate more with the core belief, “I cannot live without God.” That belief is reflected in several of the other beliefs, not front and center enough for what people need to believe at the beginning of faith. The experiential quality of the beliefs framed this way is at least one or two levels too deep below the surface. Perhaps, some of the beliefs would be

better framed by experiential questions such as the one posed to John Wesley by the Moravian pastor, Mr. Spangenberg, when he asked, “Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?”⁴ Certainly, assessments based on experience can become too subjective, but spiritual maturity will be marked by what one has experienced.

Perhaps the main challenge to a profile like this is that it will be hard for most participants to score themselves without violating a core spirit of discipleship, namely grace and reliance on God. When scoring is involved it is difficult to resist a performance approach to discipleship. A person will be tempted in four ways: dishonesty, self-condemnation, pride, or frustration. Who wants to admit less than a five on core beliefs, practices or virtues? An honest person may easily fall into a self-auditing sense of failure that short-circuits any joyful awareness of God. Or worse, a person may soar with a sense of pride with high scores. Yet, others may get frustrated with a certification of their shortcomings, possibly even blaming God for a poor performance.

While helpful for focus, clarity and intentionality, a spiritual profile assessment of this kind must be done carefully with the proper cautions in mind.

WILLOW CREEK’S ‘FOLLOW ME’

Willow Creek represents one of the most pragmatic approaches to discipleship and spiritual growth. This characteristic is based in its entrepreneurial approach to church and mission. It may still be the case that Harvard MBA students still have to

⁴ Wellington Boone, “John Wesley: Founder of Methodists,” Dare to Hope, http://daretohopejournal.com/John_Wesley.html (accessed march 1, 2011).

study Willow Creek as one of the cases of effective innovation and development.⁵ The *Reveal* study represents the learning that takes place from a pragmatic, results-oriented approach. When Willow realized that their programming was not producing the spiritual maturity that they assumed was happening, they set out to understand how to correct their approach. Using the surveyed feedback from 80,000 church-goers in 200 churches, Willow has produced the “*Follow Me*” report that is now the framework for their approach to spiritual growth.

This upgraded approach is based on several assumptions.

1. People want to grow spiritually.
2. Spiritual growth involves moving through different stages of development.
3. It is possible to identify these stages and program growth activities accordingly.
4. Since people are not all in the same stage of spiritual growth, a variety of church activities are needed.
5. There are certain actions that catalyze spiritual growth.
6. Growth, although not linear, is a process moving from simple to complex.
7. The role of church leaders is to understand these stages, the catalysts and the movements.

Regarding the role of leaders: “We say ‘Follow Me’ to those we lead. We want to be absolutely sure we know where we’re going and how we plan to get there. However, when it comes to spiritual growth, it’s not always clear how best to do that. What if we could know with confidence that the steps we’re asking people to take will actually move them closer to Christ?”⁶ The report

⁵ James Mellado, “Willow Creek Community Church,” (Boston: Publishing Division, Harvard Business School, 617-495-6117, 1991), #9-691-102.

⁶ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Follow Me* (South Barrington IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2008), 10.

offers the promise of identifying the steps that will help a person move through the different stages. The leader is then like a coach who meets the challenge to personalize the best path of growth. The first step is to identify where a person might be in their spiritual life, and then focus on where they would like to be.

The stages of growth are based on a person's relationship to Christ along a spiritual continuum:

1. *Exploring Christ*: "I believe in God, but I am not sure about Christ. My faith is not a significant part of my life."
2. *Growing in Christ*: "I believe in Jesus and I am working on what it means to get to know him."
3. *Close to Christ*: "I feel really close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance."
4. *Christ-centered*: "My relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. It guides everything I do."⁷

What is not quite clear is how the two last stages differ. How is it possible to be close to Christ and not centered in Christ? One can imagine an objection from Willard that recognizing these stages reinforces the misconception that biblical discipleship is for the exceptional Christian. Should it not be the case that exploring Christ can have only one positive outcome, and that is centering one's life in Christ? There may be degrees of understanding but can there really be degrees of commitment? Perhaps Willow's delineation of this continuum is based on observation, with the key word being "continuum." Yet, it must be noted that there is a risk of teaching a non-committed discipleship. Willow suggests that recognizing this continuum gives pastors and leaders a

⁷ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Follow Me*, 19.

good framework to figure out where people are, and then determine what steps might be taken to close the gap between reality and vision.

Then the report identifies four categories of catalysts that cause spiritual movement along the continuum.

1. Spiritual Beliefs and Attitudes.
2. Organized Church Activities.
3. Personal Spiritual Practices.
4. Spiritual Activities with Others.⁸

Data from the surveys was used to assess how fifty different factors related to these four catalysts worked to cause growth in each stage. Actually, the stages were reduced to three transition movements between each stage: early, intermediate, and advanced. One finding, for instance, was that a belief about Jesus being first in one's life, and the Bible being an authority in one's life catalyzed growth in all three movements. One is made to wonder, though, under what circumstances would those two beliefs not cause growth? However, the report was able to identify core beliefs, much like the Christian Life Profile, that would be essential for spiritual maturity, although, they did tend to be Reformation oriented beliefs like those in the profile. There was not one, for example that reflected a belief such as, "It is essential for me to vitally connect to other believers."

Several interesting findings emerged in respect to the catalyst of Organized Church Activities. The first was that weekend services were not as effective as causing growth among those who were most mature. It was not clear if this

⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Follow Me*, 27-28.

finding came from a comparison only to those who were just beginning, or reflected dissatisfaction among those who were most mature. The rate of change among those beginning their spiritual life always seems greater and more dramatic than what occurs among the mature. Regarding services, though, one wonders if a growth continuum inspires a mistaken expectation about the act of worship. It is hard to imagine a disciple becoming so mature that worship is no longer meaningful or vital. “Am I worshipping well?” may be a better question than, “Am I growing in the worship service?”

Two other findings in respect to Organized Church Activities deserve note. The opportunity to serve in some way is an effective catalyst for growth. It is common for a teacher, for example, to say that they learn more than everyone in their class because of the preparation. For many, accepting responsibility for the spiritual welfare of anyone else on any level causes growth. Also, different programs must be designed for the different places where someone may be. For instance, a short-term core belief class might be critical for the growth of someone who is moving from basic to intermediate. This principle suggests a varied, adjusting programming.

One of the most interesting surveys in the report identified what people say they need most from their church. The 80,000 participants were asked to rate eleven church attributes in two ways: importance and level of satisfaction. The five most important needs were: help to understand the Bible in depth, help to develop a personal relationship with Christ, strong programs for children, challenge to grow and take next steps, and compelling worship services. Comparisons were made between degree of importance and satisfaction to

indicate the greatest gaps. The three greatest gaps between need and experience were: help to develop relationships that encourage accountability, help in time of emotional need, and help in understanding the Bible in depth. The top-rated needs and gaps were the same in all three spiritual growth movements.⁹

In a review of the report Mike Lueken questions the value of focusing on what the person wants or needs. “This emphasis on an individual’s experiences and preferences reveals a core problem in American Christianity – the unchallenged assumption that people can accurately evaluate their church based on whether or not it meets their needs. . . . We are a culture of Christ-followers who pay far too much attention to whether or not our needs are being satisfied. And we have become a culture of church leaders who spend far too much time orienting our ministries around the ever-changing preferences of our people.”¹⁰ One does wonder if Peter, after making his grand confession of Jesus as the Christ, would have checked off that what he most needed was a cross.

In respect to the catalyst of Spiritual Activities with Others, the report found that spiritual friendships were more critical than small groups, and that evangelistic activities that put mature believers in meaningful conversations with those considering Christ were very catalytic. Consequently, there should be some activities that cultivate these sorts of opportunities.

The strategy of such a pragmatic approach is then to connect the most impactful catalysts for each movement. For example, the top five catalysts for

⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Follow Me*, 38-9.

¹⁰ Mike Lueken, “Unfinished Symphony,” *Leadership*, Winter 2008, 88.

a person in Movement 1 growing from Exploring Christ to Growing in Christ are:

1. Salvation by Grace (Spiritual Belief/Attitude)
2. The Trinity (Spiritual Belief/Attitude)
3. Serve the Church (Church Activity)
4. Prayer to seek Guidance (Spiritual Practice)
5. Reflection on Scripture (Spiritual Practice)¹¹

The goal of this approach is to achieve clarity about how to help someone grow. The primary challenge to this particular approach is that it may be too systematized and even mechanical. Doug Hall, the president of Emmanuel Gospel Center in Boston argues that people represent living systems that cannot be fixed or manipulated as if they are machines. Western technology has influenced us to see systems as comprised of parts that can be removed, replaced or changed in some way. Hall's challenge is that we are cats, not toasters, and cannot be fixed.¹² This insight regarding the dynamic nature of human experience would explain why identifying specific components in a spiritual growth matrix would be so challenging. For instance, the most influential spiritual catalyst for many might be a personal tragedy or some major life transition. How does a program plan for that? I received an email from a newly married couple who was having marital difficulty. I had briefly met the husband in an incidental encounter months before their marriage. I agreed to meet with them. As they explained their situation, the husband made

¹¹ Lueken, *Leadership*, 59.

¹² Doug Hall, "Welcome to Toaster Cat.org," Living System Ministry, <http://www.livingsystemministry.org/> (accessed March 1, 2011).

a point to say that he had never “accepted Christ.” It became very natural and even required to ask him what he thought it meant to accept Christ. As I listened it was obvious that I should invite him to get that issue settled – not as a cure-all for their challenges, but as a starting point. After years of many people challenging him to commit his life to Christ, he was ready, and began to pray a heart-felt prayer of repentance and commitment. He was in church the next week, eager to tell anyone in range what had happened to him. Some of his enthusiastic, outward expression is certainly a reflection of his temperament, but if you were to ask him just days after his prayer if Christ were the most important person in his life, he would find that a ridiculous question. Of course Christ was the most important part of his life. He obviously has a lot to learn and needs good follow-up, but a staged growth does not seem to relate. I feel more constrained to get him connected to some peers who can guide him than I do on making sure that he has the right systematic theology beliefs nailed down at the moment.

Another possible blind spot with the Willow approach is that it is not clear where the brokenness of the human experience is recognized. Certainly, the correct beliefs acknowledge the wounds of sin that people carry, yet, there seems to be a little subtext that we are mostly blank pages ready to be written on with new beliefs and experiences. Where might addictions and issues of abuse fit on the continuum? I know mature believers who would be off the page on the right of the continuum, only to later discover through a program like Alcoholics Anonymous how much they were living in denial of their real issues. In some respects, a spiritual growth matrix had sustained the denial

rather than give it room to be confronted. How does a spiritual growth program take into account the basic need that everyone needs not only forgiveness, but healing and deliverance? Hopes of full transformation must keep these realities in view. They are not just cats with which we are dealing, they are diseased and abused cats.

ALAN AND DEBRA HIRSCH

AND DAVID PLATT

The next generation of leaders is beginning to find its voice about what discipleship and spiritual formation should look like. Alan Hirsch and David Platt represent two such leaders who have quickly expanded their influence. Their emphases are different according to the contexts that have shaped their lives and ministries, but they share some common aspects that represent a major theme in the next generation.

Their approach does not present a program as much as a message, and the message starts with a challenge to deconstruct cultural and religious norms that prevent discipleship from truly happening. Their determination to examine and confront prevailing beliefs and attitudes, particularly those in the church community represents their particular and most impactful contribution to the understanding of spiritual formation. Implicit, if not often direct, is the belief that we are approaching faith and culture in a wrong way, thus compromising discipleship.

All discipleship approaches begin with some sort of critique of current state and a challenge to the status quo, but the degree of critique by the next generation of leaders is different enough to require special attention. Foster

may suggest that we are out of touch with our rich heritage in the church related to spiritual formation; Willard may see the problem as a lack of teaching and practice of discipleship; Willow Creek may attempt to provide the correct, real-life data so that the most efficient and effective next steps can be determined, but leaders like the Hirsches and Platt would argue that the root problems are much greater than any of those things. Also, for these younger leaders there is an automatic and strong connection between discipleship and mission. Mission is not one element of a spiritually formed life, but a primary result and output.

First though, Alan and Debra Hirsch argue that discipleship must include a commitment to challenge some of our most basic, operative assumptions. “Following Jesus has a very clear cost. And the cost includes living a life that sometimes runs counter to the culture around us. Serious believers who want to go deeper in their discipleship must be willing to constantly critique both personal and cultural assumptions for the sake of becoming more like Jesus.”¹³ Church, as well, as secular culture must be examined. Unless this kind of scrutiny is engaged the impediments to discipleship would remain in place, preventing authentic spiritual formation. The Hirsches identify impediments to discipleship in three areas: theology, culture, and personal issues.

In respect to theology: “The church has always believed that our most fundamental problems in discipleship have their roots in faulty views of God.”¹⁴ They argue that our view of God is flawed because we fail to

¹³ Alan and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 14.

¹⁴ Hirsches, *Untamed*, 24.

recognize the centrality of the person of Jesus in understanding God. We have accepted a view of spirituality that disconnects God from the world he created, and we are fundamentally afraid to yield control to the Spirit of God.

In respect to Jesus, they have what seems to be a novel way to stress the principle that we can only get to know God through Jesus.¹⁵ We need to understand that God is like Jesus, they assert. “Jesus is, and must be the central reference point for the Christian because God looks like Jesus and Jesus does what God wants to do!”¹⁶ They suggest that this is even “a greater truth” than that Jesus looks like God. In this emphasis they establish the centrality of Jesus, but then the challenge is “Which Jesus?” We tend to shape our image of Jesus by our own interests and inclinations, so we end up with a version of Jesus “who simply affirms our many cultural blind spots and engenders dangerous bigotry.”¹⁷

An example of embracing the “wrong Jesus,” and thus having a wrong view of God emerges when we consider the holiness of Jesus. Our views of holiness can easily reflect our cultural experience more than the reality about Jesus. I recently told a group of Christians who were Asian Indians that I spend most Wednesday evenings with a group of Jewish men who meet at various bars in the area. Afterwards, a person shared with my wife that her pastor would never do something like that, the implication that it was not a holy activity. What seems like a Jesus-like privilege to me is unimaginable to someone else. Certainly, Romans 14 would suggest that I be sensitive, and not

¹⁵ Novelty always flirts with heresy at worst, or theological impreciseness, but the Hirsches attempt to stay on course with their description of Jesus.

¹⁶ Hirsches, *Untamed*, 36.

¹⁷ Hirsches, *Untamed*, 40.

judgmental of those Christian concerns, but the Hirsches would argue that Jesus' brand of holiness connected him, rather than disconnected him with those who would be judged as unholy.

Further, they suggest that we devolve into a "sick" view of God. They suggest that we need to pursue a "Shema Spirituality" identified by Jesus in Mark 12:29-31. In the Great Commandment we get a summary of the central revelation of God as being one, not able to be identified with any type of idolatry. As well as a revelation, we get a worldview that indicates that the worship of God is connected with every area of life, that there is nothing outside of this posture of worship, and that Jesus' inclusion of love for our neighbor, makes all of life an expression of worship.¹⁸

However, to truly allow the right view of Jesus and the right view of God to thrive and function in our discipleship, we must be willing to accept the untamed leadership of God's Spirit. There is a challenge to both the conservative non-charismatic and those more comfortable with the many manifestations of the Holy Spirit's ministry. "The conservative evangelicals need to be willing to fly closer to the flame and cope with holy chaos in their lives and churches, while the more charismatically inclined need to learn the value of objective truth and communal accountability."¹⁹ The work of the Holy Spirit must be relied upon in order for any authentic spiritual life to be developed and sustained.

¹⁸ Hirsches, *Untamed*, 62.

¹⁹ Hirsches, *Untamed*, 91.

In respect to cultural impediments to discipleship, the Hirsches argue that we must work harder to identify the spirits of the age that shape our approaches to God and to all of life. The assumption is that there will always be idols, systems of belief, religious traditions, and other harmful things that we are inclined not to see, but incorporate wrongfully in our approach to spiritual life. Cultural factors in the western church would include an emphasis on money, consumerism, and status. The Hirsches suspect that many mega-churches not only fail to identify and confront those things, but actually reinforce them, sustaining them in church life.

It has been my experience that interaction with Christians from other cultures has helped to identify some of these blind spots. An extended visit with a pastor in Brazil, who had planted what had become a large, growing church was eye-opening. I was explaining that we had come to learn from him and his staff about how to do ministry. He turned to his associate pastor who was the son of an American missionary couple to that city, and asked what he thought about what I was saying. They were both puzzled. The associate replied that he had never heard Americans talk like this, that Americans always come to teach. Interestingly, what American church leaders perceived as dedicated commitment to help churches in other countries was often received as intrusive, condescending exceptionalism. The Brazilian pastor felt free to ask, “Why do Americans always feel like they have to do something when they come here, like build something? Why can’t they just come and be with us to know us?” I had a similar experience when Emmanuel Kotangle, a Ugandan Roman Catholic priest who directs the Center for Reconciliation at Duke

Divinity School, commented shortly after *Christianity Today* had had a cover photo of Rick Warren shaking the hand of the Rwandan president in a visit after Warren had announced his church's humanitarian efforts. "We appreciate what Americans want to do and they are very generous, but we wish they knew how to come and lament with us first, before they try to solve all the problems." The triumphalism of doing good looked more American than Jesus-like.

Discipleship must sustain a healthy paranoia when it comes to culture. This paranoia that keeps us aliens in this world must also be applied to the self, a third area of impediment, which has to do with personal issues. The greatest personal issue, according to the Hirsches has to do with identity. How is our identity shaped? Or, the more important question is how do we live out of an identity established in Christ? Colossians 3:1-4 makes it clear that identity issues plague Christians, and that the only remedy is to live our identity in Christ. It is not unusual for a Christian to pursue discipleship with great zeal and effort precisely because they do not have their identity in Christ. Most likely, their identity is still based in personal performance, something to prove to themselves or others. Their identity has not changed at all, they just have a different scale to use in personal audit and evaluation. How many great churches and ministries have been built by men and women who at the root of their experience are trapped in an identity crisis? Only when we find our identity in God's full acceptance and love of us in Christ are we able to be free enough to grow.

David Platt, like the Hirsches begins his approach to discipleship with a deconstruction of Christianity, especially of that experienced in America. He

has been challenged by his personal experiences with house-church Christians in China. Their spiritual vitality highlighted what seems to be missing in discipleship, American-style. Again, a starting point is the understanding or image of Jesus. He charges that we are redefining Christianity by twisting the biblical Jesus into an image with which we are comfortable. “A nice, middle-class, American Jesus. A Jesus who doesn’t mind materialism and who would never call us to give away everything we have. A Jesus who would not expect us to forsake our closest relationships so that he receives all our affection. A Jesus who is fine with normal devotion that does not infringe on our comforts, because, after all, he loves us just the way we are.”²⁰ Platt’s challenge is to ask if we think that Jesus is worth walking away from everything. He believes that the American dream has trained Christians to make much of themselves, rather than of Christ, and that we have done the Christian life by our own power. Consequently, we rarely, if ever need the power of God, or the presence of God. Thus, our life, by orientation is so different from Jesus that it is impossible to truly be his disciple.

The message of Christ has been reduced, writes Platt, to the shorthand, “God loves me. Me. Christianity’s object is me.”²¹ The proof that this is the message is seen by the consumer approach many Christians take towards church. People are inclined to shop for a church based on music preferences and needs-based programs. True discipleship will focus not on our comforts and needs, but on God’s glory. Platt summarizes the purpose of the Christian

²⁰ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010), 13.

²¹ Platt, *Radical*, 70.

life as to experience God's grace, so that we may extend his glory.²² To do this we must embrace God's concern for the entire world, we must commit to becoming reproducers and not merely recipients, and we must challenge our attachment to money.

Platt challenges people to "experiment" for one year with radical discipleship by making the following commitments:

1. Pray for the entire world.
2. Read through the entire Bible.
3. Sacrifice one's money for a specific purpose.
4. Spend time in another context.
5. Commit one's life to a multiplying community.

SUMMARY

There are strengths and weaknesses to all of the approaches that have been considered. There are also other approaches that express different strengths and emphases. John Piper's emphasis on the supremacy and glory of God is important. Rick Warren has had an enormous impact through his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Para-church ministries like InterVarsity and Campus Crusade have played major roles in the area of spiritual formation. Brian McLaren and the Emergent Movement are attempting to authenticate current-day discipleship (although, they would certainly not use that word).

I am currently the pastor of a church plant, and as we have thought about how best to help people be spiritually formed into disciples of Christ we have

²² Platt, *Radical*, 65.

identified three emphases: being present to God, connected to one another, engaged in the world. Approaches to spiritual growth that help people develop the spiritual disciplines equip them to be present to God. In counseling sessions with members it is often surprising how inoperative a person's spiritual life is because they have never learned to be present to God. It is not surprising how disconnected people are from one another, yet some of the approaches still seem to be too individually oriented. The ones that emphasize the spiritual disciplines often seem weak in producing missional momentum, and the ones that are active towards mission seem shallow in respect to practicing the presence of God. There are no sure-proof methodologies or programs that do it all. Whatever will help us live like Jesus did in respect to his relationship to the Father, his relationship with his followers, and his relationship to the world will help us to live vitally connected to God's presence and purpose.

CHAPTER 7:

SERVICE AND JUSTICE

Church planters always begin their work with the vision and hope of reaching people with the Gospel of Christ. I was not sure whom our church would reach when eighteen families gathered to make plans for this new work. I did not imagine that it would be Jack.

Jack, the first person to express interest in this new church, was the most notable homeless person in our small town. At six feet and five inches tall and over three hundred pounds, he was hard to miss. He had shown up at a Billy Graham film that was sponsored by a mission group from the South, and there he was at our first organizing meeting. He never missed a meeting and became a fixture in our small fellowship. He was eager to help us come to know our town better. I had not moved to the area yet, so he was my guide from time to time. Jack usually kept his bipolar illness in check by staying on medications. I had to learn to be quick on my feet when Jack would interrupt our meetings with an odd question or observation.

The group loved Jack and included him in almost all church activities, including the Memorial Day camping trip. Months after beginning formal services, we began to reach other people who came to know Jack. He was the biggest usher we had. Paul, who was mentioned in the previous chapter and was not yet a Christian, was interested in helping Jack. He was willing to take Jack into his home one night when an emergency forced Jack to leave the local shelter. Eventually, Paul began to manage the pension check that Jack received

every month, coordinating with social services to address any other needs that Jack might have.

Thanks to Jack, we learned in our very first days how to experience and express the love of God. He was not a project or a mascot, but he was a symbol of welcome and grace. His presence among us was too normal for it to be a “big deal.”

We also learned something from Paul, who was trying to understand what to believe about God, about Jesus, and about the Gospel. It seemed very obvious and natural to Paul that he should befriend Jack. He also befriended Norman, an eighty-seven-year-old man who was living by himself while his wife was in a nursing home. Paul and his family brought Norman to church most Sundays, celebrated his birthday, and included him in family celebrations. Norman had not been to a church service since 1947, so he set the record as the most “unchurched” person in attendance. Paul, a non-Christian, was the best Christian we had. It did not take long for Paul to come to a personal faith and experience with Christ.

Being present to God by being present to those in need has received renewed emphasis among evangelicals in the last several decades. Today, however, spiritual integrity must find an expression in a biblical effort to identify with the needs of the poor.

Although always committed to many forms of charity and relief, evangelicals were not known for an interest in or commitment to widespread social needs. The common historical understanding is that the modernist-fundamentalist debates at the beginning of the 20th century split the church into

liberal and conservative wings; the former was passionate for social justice and the latter was passionate for evangelism and personal salvation. Mark Labberton writes, “This divide had not characterized the church in earlier eras, but it emerged as a response to shifting theological and cultural ground in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This divide has been a hallmark of American Protestantism ever since.”¹

The advent of the Social Gospel, finding its seminal articulation in Walter Rauschenbusch’s 1907 book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, was propelled not only by the social crises of the day but also by the advances in scientific and social sciences that challenged Christian orthodoxy and inspired human potential. Millard Erikson summarizes the critical change in the understanding of human nature and society that led to the social gospel this way: “The basic human problem lies not in perverted human nature, but in an evil social environment. According to this view, there is no point in trying to change individuals, for they will be thrown back into a corrupt society and be infected again as it were. Humans are not essentially evil. They are whatever their environment makes them to be.”² Those with a more liberal theology based their new estimate of human nature on the evolutionary process, which they believed was at work in the natural world for the ultimate benefit of humanity, according to Sydney Ahlstrom.³ Rauschenbusch’s words describe it best:

¹ Mark Labberton, “A Mighty River or a Slippery Slope,” *Leadership*, Summer 2010, 21.

² Millard J Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 890.

³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 780.

Humanity is gaining in elasticity and capacity for change, and every gain in general intelligence, in organizing capacity, in physical and moral soundness, and especially in responsiveness to ideal motives, again increases the ability to advance without disastrous reactions. The swiftness of evolution in our own country proves the immense latent perfectibility in human nature.⁴

Ahlstrom writes that though the Social Gospel is considered to be one of the hallmark contributions of American Christianity to the world, it was just a submovement in liberalism and a phase dependent on the extreme confidence of those decades.⁵

However, a commitment to relieve the suffering caused by poverty was not a new phenomenon for the church. Timothy Smith, while studying the revival and holiness movements nearly fifty years earlier, came to “the dawning discovery that revivalistic religion and the quest of Christian perfection lay at the fountainhead of our nation’s heritage of hope.”⁶ He chronicles the rapid growth of concern for social issues that characterized that era. Urbanization and immigration before the Civil War forced churches to face the growing needs. Smith quotes a sermon on charity given by evangelist Edward Norris Kirk in 1842 in Boston during its revival to illustrate this concern: “Our whole system of education, our modes of life, our very standards of personal piety need great renovation.”⁷

Yet, the Christian concern for relieving suffering was not just localized to certain eras of American church history. Even though there were periods throughout its history when the church was capable of supporting and

⁴ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 795.

⁵ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 786.

⁶ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980), 7.

⁷ Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 162.

sustaining great injustice, the history of the church, especially in renewal, has been punctuated with notable efforts to relieve suffering. Jenell Williams Paris notes the work of Francis of Assisi in the twelfth century and William Wilberforce in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century to suggest that concerns for justice were evident in the church.⁸

Despite what history can teach us, attention to social needs among evangelicals in the twentieth century has not been a vital part of the spiritual experience. Major books on theology have not devoted much attention to the subject, whether under the character of God, the work of Christ, or the ministry of the church. The term ‘justice’ is applied primarily to the topic of salvation under justification and atonement. Evangelical seminaries will usually require some sort of social ethics class, but most theology classes and biblical exegesis classes will not naturally include the subject, unless a student is studying the prophets. Social concerns might seem “extracurricular,” depending on a person’s passion.⁹ Also, models of the pastoral life usually do not include a special focus on social issues. For instance, a recent book identifying the fifteen key characteristics of an effective pastor did not list any explicit characteristic that focuses on an area of relief or justice.¹⁰ Most books that list the characteristics of healthy and effective churches make the same omission, unless social concern appears under the topic of outreach.

⁸ Jenell Williams Paris, “A Tradition of Justice: Snapshots of the Church Pursuing Justice Across the Major Periods of Church History,” in *The Justice Project*, ed. Brian McLaren, Elisa Padilla, and Ashley Bunting Seeber (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 52.

⁹ This is actually not unlike approaches to other subjects like evangelism, prayer, and leadership. It seems that evangelicals have tended to focus on theology and biblical exegesis with little if any inclusion of these subjects.

¹⁰ Kevin W. Mannoia and Larry Walkemeyer, *15 Characteristics of Effective Pastors* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2007), 7.

Until recently, few prominent names were associated with social concerns, with John Perkins, Jim Wallis, Ron Sider, and Tony Campolo being the exceptions. To illustrate the absence of this focus in the evangelical world, one may note the significant shift that occurred when Rick Warren highlighted the biblical emphasis on the subject of the poor. *Time* magazine identifies Warren as “unquestionably the U.S.’s most influential and highest profile churchman.”¹¹ Warren is intent on changing the way that evangelicals approach social needs around the world. In 2003, he announced the PEACE plan, a vision to mobilize every church on earth to provide health care, education and economic development. Billy Graham described it as “the greatest, most comprehensive, and most biblical vision for world missions I’ve ever heard or read about.”¹² Andy Crouch may be too narrow in his description of evangelical social effort in the twentieth century, but he argues that most relief effort was “occasional action to keep people alive, to teach them the Gospel in a credible way.”¹³ Warren wants to attack the issues of spiritual emptiness, selfish leadership, hunger, sickness and illiteracy. PEACE is an acronym for promote reconciliation, equip servant leaders, assist the poor, care for the sick, and educate the next generation. Warren has begun a pilot program of this plan in Rwanda, but the results are uncertain at this stage.

Warren’s transition to social activism is notable, though it may be difficult to detach it from his high energy, impulsive approach to everything. His wife, Kay, became interested in HIV/Aids issues in Africa and convinced

¹¹ David Van Biema, “The Global Ambition of Rick Warren,” *Time*, August 7, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1830147,00.html>, 1. (accessed February 23, 2011).

¹² Van Biema, *Time*, 2.

¹³ Van Biema, *Time*, 4.

Warren to travel there with her. He said that he heard a message from God: “God said, ‘You don’t care squat about the sick and the poor. And you need to change; you need to repent.’”¹⁴ In his explanation, he is quick to say that even though he has graduate degrees in theology, he had never realized that there were over 2,000 verses in the Bible about the poor. According to *Time*, Warren is both leading and riding “the newest wave of change in the Evangelical community: an expansion beyond social conservatism to causes such as battling poverty, opposing torture and combating global warming.”¹⁵ Even though Warren did not publicly endorse a presidential candidate in 2004, he did publish a list of nonnegotiable social issues, which was comprised of the issues related to abortion and gay marriage. In 2008, he said that his values had not changed but that they had expanded.¹⁶

Brian McLaren, who represents a different development among evangelicals (which some, including, him, might define as departure), describes a similar transition:

1. I became disillusioned with a way of “doing church” that was not working, especially for younger and more educated people.
2. I first focused on pragmatics but then began asking theological questions as well.
3. Those questions eventually led me to ask, “What is the gospel anyway?”
4. That gospel-centered question led me back to the Scriptures, especially the Gospels.
5. There, I was confronted with a message into which justice was inextricably woven.¹⁷

¹⁴ Van Biema, *Time*, 3.

¹⁵ Van Biema, *Time*, 2.

¹⁶ Van Biema, *Time*, 3.

¹⁷ Brian McLaren, “Introduction: A Conversation About Justice,” in *The Justice Project*, ed. Brian McLaren, Elisa Padilla, and Ashley Bunting Seeber (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 52.

Some would argue that McLaren has gone too far and is basically deconstructing evangelical faith, but McLaren would argue that we miss the main lesson from the Reformation if we do not hold our own Christian culture up to the same scrutiny that they were brave enough to use.

AN APPLIED THEOLOGY

In this wave of renewed vision and commitment to social needs is a recognition of the passion of God for those who suffer. The Incarnation of Christ is seen as an identification with that suffering. Simon Chan writes that the church that Jesus founded should first be a community of suffering. "In baptism we begin a journey with a suffering community in a world that is still groaning in the pangs of child birth (Romans 8:22)."¹⁸ He argues that a spiritual theology must include this connection with the world that God is redeeming.

The lordship of Christ should set in place the expectation that the values of Christ should be expressed in all parts of society. John Stott, through his global involvement with Lausanne, always had a view towards social need, and he challenges churches to work for affecting their home nation.

Will Christians be able to influence their country so that the values and standards of the kingdom of God permeate the whole national culture – its consensus on moral and bioethical issues, its recognition of human rights, its respect for the security of human life (including that of the unborn, the handicapped, and the senile) its concern for the homeless, the unemployed and people trapped in the cycle of poverty, its attitude to dissidents, its stewardship of the environment, its treatment of criminals, and the whole way of life of its citizens? . . . There can surely be no

¹⁸ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 113.

doubt that our Lord Jesus Christ wants his values and standards to prevail.¹⁹

Whereas evangelicals may have been inclined to view the ills of society as validation of the Bible's condemnation of a sinful world, Stott is inclined not to judge the world in this way but to accept responsibility for the brokenness. Referencing Jesus' compelling calling of the church to be salt and light in Matthew 5:13-16, Stott writes that the church is culpable for the condition of society. "It is hypocritical to raise our eyebrows and shrug our shoulders as if it were not our responsibility. Jesus told us to be salt and light to society. If therefore darkness and rottenness abound, it is to a large measure our fault, and we must accept much of the blame."²⁰

A major shift in the church's recognition of its social responsibility has occurred in a new focus on justice. It seems that charity has always been viewed as an obligation of the church, but now evangelical leaders are looking at the biblical issue of justice in new ways. Mae Elise Cannon, formerly the director of social ministries at Willow Creek, illustrates this shift as she describes her own experience.

In January 2005, I began a ministry at Willow Creek Community Church that focused on social justice. Of course there had been and were others at Willow who were knowledgeable about and valued social justice, but I wanted there to be an organized movement within the church that not only extended compassion but started to get at the root of the issues of poverty, oppression and injustice.

At the same time there seemed to be a movement sweeping through the evangelical church on a national, if not global front. I began to notice articles on social justice appearing in Christian magazines. Other partner churches were beginning to ask similar questions about the church's role in shaping society and leading reform. Over and over I

¹⁹ John Stott, *The Living Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 128-129

²⁰ Stott, *The Living Church*, 134.

heard talk in Christian circles about what it means to live out Matthew 25, what it means to put faith in action as described in James 2 and Isaiah 58. Everywhere I turned it seemed people were asking what it means to respond to the poor and the oppressed in society.²¹

This shift fostered in Cannon a search for biblical and theological integration. “I wanted to know at the core of my being what it means to live out social justice individually and corporately as the body of Christ.”²²

Certainly, one of the people at the forefront of the movement of the evangelical focus on social justice is Tim Keller. Like Warren and McLaren, a transition was required for Keller to get to his current level of commitment. He writes that as a child he avoided the only poor child he knew at his school, the only person who was more on the “outside” of the cool kids than Keller judged himself to be. Going to college in the late 1960’s, he became interested in the Civil Rights movement, but he experienced the dissonance of having secular friends who were passionate about racial justice, while his orthodox Christian community seemed to care less. Realizing for the first time that the believing, older white people he knew were wrong about such an important social issue contributed to his loss of interest in Christianity.

Later, he met some Christian students who seemed passionate about justice, but his approach was to merely import his new views on justice into the theology with which he had grown up, not realizing the deep biblical basis for such views. Going to seminary, he was befriended by an African-American who was able to help him understand his own blindness in respect to culture and racism.

²¹ Mae Elise Cannon, *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 12.

²² Cannon, *Social Justice Handbook*, 13.

After seminary, Keller enrolled in a doctoral program and focused his thesis work on the biblical and historical role of deacons. That work helped him to discover the important role that deacons had played in addressing economic and justice needs. He became committed to a ministry that would focus on deed as well as word. Afterwards, Keller became part of the faculty of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia where he came to know faculty who lived in inner-city Philadelphia and understood the systemic nature of injustice. Harvie Conn and his book, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* were particularly influential.²³ In 1998, Keller accepted an invitation to go to Manhattan to start Redeemer, where by necessity, as well as through theology, he has become an evangelical spokesman for justice.²⁴

Keller's apologetic for justice begins with the familiar call from Micah 6:8 to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God, answering the question about what God desires.²⁵ The theme of justice throughout the Old Testament is associated with providing care for the most vulnerable, as summarized by Zechariah. "This is what the LORD Almighty says: Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the immigrant or the poor" (Zechariah 7:10-11).

The biblical standard of justice was to be measured by how people in this group fared, because they were people without civic economic power. According to Keller, this standard was based on the character of God.²⁶ Along with the many passages that say that God cares for the most vulnerable (e.g.,

²³ Harvie M. Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

²⁴ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice* (New York: Dutton, 2010), xv-xix.

²⁵ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 3.

²⁶ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 5.

Psalms 146:7-9, Deuteronomy 10:17-18) is the fact that God is sometimes introduced by biblical writers on the basis of this care. That God would want to be known as “a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows” (Psalms 68:4-5) stands in stark contrast to the practice among ancient cultures of identifying gods with the most powerful and elite in society, such as kings and priests.²⁷ Keller asks, “If God’s character includes a zeal for justice that leads him to have the tenderest love and closest involvement with the socially weak, then what should God’s people be like?”²⁸

Added to this biblical notion of justice based on the character of God is the emphasis on a righteous life, a life that reflects God’s rightness in all relationships. What is remarkable about the righteous life is how social it is, both in relieving need and in proactively battling injustice. Job’s description of his life, which God did not dispute, becomes the best illustration of righteousness.

Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow’s heart sing. I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. Job 29:11-17

See also Job 31:13-28 to get a full picture of righteousness. Keller notes that Job’s righteousness addresses two types of justice: primary and rectifying. Primary justice relates to the relief of need, while rectifying justice focuses on confronting and overcoming those who are responsible for injustice.²⁹

²⁷ Keller, *Generous Justice* 6.

²⁸ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 8.

²⁹ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 12.

It is important to note that evangelicals have tended to locate righteousness primarily in soteriology because of the emphasis on justification by faith. The Reformation recovery of a theology of grace and the avoidance of any sense of works-righteousness highlighted righteousness as that which was imputed by God. Righteousness as applied to right living seemed to have been diminished, at least in respect to vocabulary. Right living also became more focused on private, spiritual habits and a set of holy behaviors, which were usually in response to whatever were the dominant vices of the day. Some would argue that there is still a disconnect between justice and our view of spirituality. Doing justice, for instance, is still not given a prominent place in the discussion of spiritual formation, as is even indicated by the lack of comment about discipleship in this thesis project. One wonders if a present-day Job would plead his case with a list of spiritual disciplines and avoided headline sins.

In building the case for the Christian commitment to social justice, Keller turns to the example of Jesus and argues that Jesus sustained the Hebrew Scripture's commitment to the powerless. "Jesus not only shared the Old Testament's zeal for the cause of the vulnerable, he also adopted the prophet's penetrating use of justice as heart analysis, the sign of true faith."³⁰ The words of Jesus that might be most comparable to passages from the prophets are those found in Matthew 25:31-46, where it says that the sheep and goats will be separated on the day of judgment. Jesus envisions a community that takes care of those with great need. Such care does not earn one's salvation but indicates that one is truly saved.

Throughout his teaching, Jesus made no distinction between social virtue and moral virtue, as is evident, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

³⁰ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 49.

Moral virtue would always be based on the core principle of love for God and love for neighbor. Jesus spells out the social expression of love for our neighbors most strikingly in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The emphasis in that parable is on neglect: the neglect of the religiously observant. Actually, the religious dedication of the priest and the Levite is repudiated by their failure to attend to the robbers' victim. When Jesus depicts the Samaritan as the best example of the fulfillment of the Great Commandment, he is deliberately insulting his audience's spiritual sensibilities and is attempting to redefine them.

Keller states that we may know these things about God and about Jesus but still not be motivated to do justice. Three other factors should help us to be genuinely motivated: understanding the creation account's description of people being made in the image of God, recognizing God's ownership over all things, and experiencing God's transforming grace. We will never meet anyone who does not bear the image of God. We have been entrusted with God's generous resources to be used wisely and equitably. Receiving God's grace instead of the true justice we deserve should so thoroughly transform us that we cannot resist caring for those in need. We must be motivated by grace, not guilt-driven obligation. "Many people who are evidently genuine Christians do not demonstrate much concern for the poor. How do we account for that? . . . We tend to try to develop a social conscience in Christians the same way the world does – through guilt . . . I believe, however, when justice for the poor is connected not to guilt but to grace and to the gospel, this pushes the button down deep in believers' souls, and they begin to wake up."³¹

³¹ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 107.

Keller believes that when properly motivated by grace, Christians and churches will move towards doing justice in direct relief, individual development, community development, racial reconciliation, and social reform.³² The impact will be both with individuals and societies.

NECESSITY AND EXPOSURE

The power of necessity and exposure to inform and apply theology should not be underestimated. Direct exposure to need is absolutely necessary to produce any kind of change. It was such exposure that opened Rick Warren to God's convicting voice. Another example of what happens when someone becomes more exposed to need is Jane Wathome, the wife of a prominent business leader in Nairobi, Kenya. While serving as an intern at Nairobi Chapel, Jane became interested in pursuing more theological and biblical counseling education, so she enrolled in a degree program in a local seminary. An internship requirement of the program connected her with an agency that was working with women infected or affected by the HIV/AIDS crisis in Kenya. I have personally heard her tell her story about what happened when she began to visit a "slum" in her area. She was eager to evangelize the women living there, but she immediately realized that in order to truly love them and not just target them for a gospel presentation, she had to address their needs. Her love did not have spiritual integrity until she did this. What developed out of that exposure is the Beacon of Hope, a non-profit community relief and reform center that serves the women and their families. In an effort to provide the women with some kind of employment, Jane inquired about what kind of work they would like to do. They said that they would like to learn how to make rugs that could be

³² Keller, *Generous Justice*, 130.

sold. So Jane, through her business contacts, found a rug designer who could help the women learn how to design rugs and others who could train them to weave rugs, and a small industry was born. My wife and I had the privilege of attending the grand opening of the first Beacon of Hope carpet store, which opened in an up-scale, Nairobi Mall. The First Lady to Kenya's President did the honors of the ribbon cutting, and she was later in the audience to hear some of the women tell their stories.

Jane immediately discovered that exposure to one need leads to another need. Beacon of Hope is always taking steps into new areas of need. Right away, an HIV testing clinic was established. Soon, a school for the children of the women was developed. Vocational training is now offered in carpet weaving as well as spinning, tailoring, dressmaking, screen-printing, card making, beadwork, jewelry and basketry. Quite an enterprise, expressing the love of God and purpose of Christ, has developed.³³

ANOTHER CHANGE: MUTUALITY

As evangelicals face the challenges of expanding their understanding and application of the Gospel to reflect God's heart and Jesus' practice towards the vulnerable, there is an additional challenge that usually goes unnoticed, except to those

³³ Beacon of Hope, <http://www.beaconafrica.org/en/> (accessed Saturday, February 26, 2011). While visiting Nairobi Chapel, a mission team from the Chapel Hill Bible Church, which included my son, met Jane at the beginning of her work. Our church bought their first weaving loom, and my son designed their first website. Jane speaks internationally about her model of social and gospel entrepreneurship. There are stories like hers wherever there is great need. For instance, my wife's brother, Bill Lineberger from Charlotte, went years ago on a mission trip from his church to Mfungano Island, a remote, Kenyan island in Lake Victoria. They went to meet a Wycliffe bible translator, Naphtaly Mattah, who had grown up on the island. Naphtaly and his wife could not ignore the fact that many of their peers were dying of AIDS, orphaning their children or leaving them in the care of grandmothers who had no income. So they opened a boarding school, Gethsemane Garden Christian Center (GGCC), which now has nearly 500 students. Bill Lineberger and his wife, Debbie, played a key role in this development and still do to this day. I have invested in both Beacon and GGCC. Gethsemane Garden Christian Center, <http://www.ggcckenya.com/about-us/> (accessed Saturday, February 26, 2011).

on the receiving end of renewed efforts of care. How can efforts from those who have power and resources benefit those who do not, without sustaining the disconnecting positions of power and weakness? How can the strong serve the weak in a manner that truly changes each? How can the vulnerable come to experience the full dignity of respect and participation when they have had to depend on others? As always, Jesus becomes the model, and his model can be summarized in one word: incarnation. He became weak by putting on the broken flesh of humanity. In doing so, Jesus established a mutuality with those he came to serve. That mutuality is remarkable considering the two parties: the Son of God, co-eternal in glory with the Father, and sinful flesh. That mutuality is not natural to most efforts of relief or social justice. Boundaries between strength and weakness are usually not crossed in either direction. Therefore, some of the best social justice efforts may provide some relief, but they are compromised and unable to rise above condescension and unhelpful paternalism.

The international group Word Made Flesh (WMF) has been trying to practically address the issue of mutuality. It describes itself “as a community of contemplative activists who follow the most vulnerable of the world’s poor to God’s heart. Our call is to practice the presence and proclamation of the kingdom of God among friends who are poor by embodying love and hope.”³⁴ There is a recognition that love cannot be fully expressed as Jesus expressed it without mutuality and that friendship is the only way to truly establish mutuality. Jesus’ death on the cross was the ultimate expression of his sacrificial love, but his description of his disciples as “friends,” not just servants, gives that sacrifice the relational framework that expresses the depth of that love (John 15:13, 15).

³⁴ Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friends at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Serve and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 11.

It is easy to think that evangelism, mission, justice, and relief can be accomplished with words and relief actions, but without friendship, they are not done or received in the spirit of Jesus. “Ministry among poor and vulnerable people reminds us that words are rarely enough – what each of us needs is to know that we are loved by Jesus, beloved of God. Everything else flows from that. In situations of injustice or despair, words alone are particularly insufficient. People need to be loved and valued by others. They need to see what love looks like.”³⁵

There is a danger that our language and practices could reduce people to an over-generalized category of “the poor”, thus identifying them too narrowly by their difficult contexts.³⁶ Language that is based on any separateness threatens the potential of friendship and does not build the necessary bridges. Years into a friendship with a Kenyan pastor who had served with me for a year, I discovered that my use of the word “tribe” to describe the different people groups in his nation was offensive to him. I actually thought that I was being culturally astute, using a description that I had first heard from Kenyans and recognizing that the distinctions present in a nation that was comprised of multiple tribes was important. However, in my living room, my friend helped me to see that I was not pursuing mutuality when he corrected me by asking if we spoke of Irish or Italians as “tribes.”

Common patterns of language and thinking often prevent friendship. For instance, it might be common to assume that distance is inevitable between those who give and receive. Even to describe the relationship in such a binary fashion as giver and receiver reinforces the problem. Such an understanding can make one think that giving flows in one direction or that “resources” are always financial. Most people who have

³⁵ Heuertz and Pohl, *Friends*, 10-11.

³⁶ Heuertz and Pohl, *Friends* 12.

been on the giving end easily come away from their experience with a sense of having received more than they gave by what they have learned from those who received. The real challenge to friendship is the inability to have a shared life. Can a true friendship exist when lives are so different? They may, but the depth of friendship may be in question. It is hard for someone to invite friendship if they perceive the other person as a tourist to their life. One of my sons and his wife deliberately live in an economically challenged area. His wife has worked for a non-profit organization that finds jobs for ex-offenders. One of her clients was shocked to discover that she lived on the street where he had lived. Another, upon release, was surprised to run into her at his local grocery. What is not clear is whether or not their living there is welcomed or resented. It is not an area where one would live if one had a choice, so for someone to choose to live there is confusing, if not offensive. It is not easy to develop a shared life when the starting points are different. WMF has found that it is very challenging to try to shift from a cause-driven model of mission and service to a community-building model. It takes time and a commitment to flexibility.

I have experienced an unexpected model of mutuality in a surprising place by some surprising teaches. On a visit to Amman, Jordan to see the work of Questscope, a non-profit organization that works with disadvantaged youth and women, I met with a group of Muslim university students who had been trained to be mentors to youth who had been arrested or gotten in some kind of trouble. The motto of Questscope is *"Putting the Last First."* These students explained to me how they had changed by becoming involved with these youth who were so different from them. One young woman explained that when she first signed up for the mentor training, her parents tried to discourage her by saying that it was going to be a waste of her time and a distraction from

her studies. She went through with it, thinking that it was a good thing to do. With compassion, she began to work with a young person. Over time, her attitude changed from compassion to communion, meaning that more and more she shared an identity with the person. "After a while," she said, "I realized that we were not so different, that we were really the same. Just our circumstances were different."³⁷

SUMMARY

Only time will tell if the growing commitment to relief and justice ministries will produce reformation-like change in the church and world. What is clear, though, is a desire to know, understand and express the heart of God towards the poor and disadvantaged and to practice the full ministry of Jesus. Churches will be challenged to learn the ways of God in a fresh and transforming manner, which will require greater dependence on God. In other words, churches will be driven more towards God as they move towards others for whom he cares. Then it may be the case that the church will be best described, as was its founder and leader, as anointed by God, going around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with them (Acts 10:38).

³⁷ Questscope visit and conversation with students in Amman, Jordan, May 20, 2006.

CHAPTER 8:

RADICAL ENGAGEMENT

Jesus is the model of expressing God's heart for justice through friendship. Jesus is the model for a life that is truly present to God, vitally connected to others, and engaged effectively in the world. The compelling example of his life is what leads to the call to discipleship. To learn how to love God and how to love others boils down to following Jesus. It is in following his example that we are challenged to see one of his most striking characteristics: he was radically engaged with those who seemed to be the most far from God. He was "a friend of sinners" (Luke 7:34).

Jesus seemed to experience a special joy in God through his interactions with those who most would consider rejected by God. Most notable is his encounter with the Samaritan woman at a well. First of all, Jesus violates clearly set religious, racial and gender boundaries by engaging her in a conversation that starts with his thirst. She is surprised by the request, but what is more surprising is that the conversation then turns to an offer from Jesus of the gift of God, the gift one would imagine is only offered to Jews. What is notable, though, is Jesus' experience after the conversation. He had started the conversation thirsty, and probably hungry, but now when offered food, he is so full of doing his Father's will that he declines. It is difficult for us to attach the human emotion of excitement to Jesus, but if there was a moment in which he expressed great excitement, it was certainly this one. He was full of doing the Father's work.

To be present to God and to fulfill his purpose, as Jesus did, churches must be radically engaged with the world. This engagement is what is at the core of being a missional church, and like justice and discipleship it comes from the heart of God. Walt Kallestad writes, “God is a missionary God, and the church must be a missionary church.”¹ Again, Jesus becomes both the pattern and the measure of this mission.

In Jesus’ mission, people who found religion to be irrelevant, or worse, toxic, found Jesus to be irresistible. Tim Keller summarizes this pattern:

The crucial point is that, in general, religiously observant people were offended by Jesus, but those estranged from religious and moral observance were intrigued and attracted to him. We see this throughout the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ life. In every case where Jesus meets a religious person and a sexual outcast (as in Luke 7) or a religious person and a racial outcast (as in John 3-4) or a religious person and a political outcast (as in Luke 19), the outcast is the one who connects with Jesus and the elder-brother brother type does not.²

An expectation emerges from this observation of Jesus’ impact: churches should be irresistible to those considered outcasts to religious experience. However, many churches do not have that expectation, nor that experience. Then the real challenge appears. Are we doing what Jesus did? “If the preaching of our ministries and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be teaching the same message that Jesus did.”³

The acid test of being radically engaged is whether or not there are “tax collectors and sinners” in the orbit and flow of a church. Mark Mittelberg

¹ Walt Kallestad, *Turn Your Church Inside Out: Building a Community for Others* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 12.

² Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 15.

³ Keller, *Prodigal God*, 15-16.

challenges not the teaching of the church but its core values when it is not evident that a church is engaging the same kind of far-away people Jesus did. The first core value that supports all others is the easiest one to accept, but usually the most difficult one to apply: *people matter to God*. No church would reject that value, but Mittelberg writes, “This belief is the hardest one to fully absorb into our value system. It’s also the most difficult value to build into those around us.”⁴ Because this value is assumed, it is usually overlooked. For instance, churches may have some sort of growth plan or expectation, but it is likely that their plan reflects the boldness and near desperation that knowing how much people matter to God would generate. When one traces the incarnation and cross of Christ back to this value there is a greater urgency to reaching people.

This value is most often tested when some sort of change may be required in order to reach people. A resistance to change programming, space, strategy, staff, or other church factors in order to more effectively reach people is a sure sign that the people-value is not securely in place. One of the most remarkable examples of the application of this value was expressed by First Congregational Church of Hopkinton, Massachusetts. Under the leadership of its pastor, Richard Germaine, it came to the conclusion that its historic building, the picturesque, centerpiece of the town, in front of which is the starting line of the Boston Marathon, was no longer an effective tool for reaching its growing community. New England has plenty of former church

⁴ Mark Mittelberg, *Building a Contagious Church: Revolutionizing the Way We View And Do Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 35.

buildings that had to be sold after the church declined, but it was unheard of for a thriving church to relocate. Now the first church building in town is the home of a Korean congregation, and First Church occupies a property that allowed it to expand its capacity to serve people. They believed that people mattered so much to God that they were willing to give up their treasured building.

In his own time, Charles Finney, with different vocabulary, said that when God does a new work, he uses “new measures.” “God himself can’t bring reformation except through new strategies – at least God has always chosen that path as the wisest and best he could devise.”⁵ The new measures usually face conflict and cause conflict. A worship issue in the early half of the eighteenth-century was whether or not to use an organ in worship. What drums and electric guitars were to the worship wars in the last quarter of the twentieth-century, organs were then. Said Finney, “Many churches still would not tolerate an organ in their building. They wouldn’t get half as upset to be told sinners are going to hell than to be told someone is installing an organ in the meeting house.”⁶

Jesus’ radical engagement with people began with his radical identification with sinners. The first appearance of Jesus in the gospel of Mark is shocking because of whom he is with. After the prophetic opening of the gospel, announcing that the messenger was coming to prepare the way for the Lord, and John the Baptist’s big build-up about the greater one to come, Jesus

⁵ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1988), 172.

⁶ Finney, *Lectures*, 165.

shows up among sinners, coming to be baptized. The import of Jesus' baptism should not be underestimated. His beginning was with sinners. He was with them, one of them.

Later, when Jesus called Levi to follow him, and then he followed Levi home for a banquet celebration, Jesus' commitment and love for sinners becomes clear. When criticized for his association with the wrong people, his defense is very instructive. He essentially tells his religious critics that they do not know God well enough. At least they do not know God well enough to know what he meant when he said through Hosea that he desired mercy instead of sacrifice (Matthew 9:13). Jesus is not at all confused about what that statement means. Knowing God's heart, he announces the application: he came for the lost.

Jesus' pattern of that strategy is almost impossible for pastors and churches to emulate today. What pastor would ever tell a search committee that he would come primarily for the sake of those not reached by the church. A few months ago I had the privilege of preaching at the 25th anniversary of Grace Baptist Church, of which I was the church planter. The church is between pastors and has an active search going on. I felt led to challenge them to not consider what they, the church, thought that they most needed in a pastor, but what they thought their community most needed. They should resist the inclination to find a pastor who can serve them, instead, finding a pastor who can help them best serve their community. Conversations with search committee members afterwards indicated that such an approach had not occurred to them but was welcome.

When churches cease to measure their effectiveness by how content their members may be, and begin to measure it by how present “tax collectors and sinners” are in their church life, then they are more and more reflecting the heart of God and the mission of Christ. However, usually a shift is required in how a church may perceive itself. George Hunter, citing the example of Saint Patrick and Celtic Christianity, writes that a church must see itself as a movement instead of an institution, and must function like a Celtic “monastic community.”⁷ According to Hunter, Celtic Christianity was in part a reaction to the Roman institutional form, and was also shaped by its mission to barbarians. In the latter, Celtic practice could be described as missional. In contrast to the eastern monasteries, which organized to escape the materialism of the Roman world and the corruption of the church, “the Celtic monasteries organized to penetrate the pagan world and to extend the Church,” writes Hunter.⁸

Hunter relies on the work of John Finney to contrast the Celtic approach to mission and evangelism with the Roman approach. The Roman approach centered around presenting the Christian message, inviting a response, and then welcoming them into the community of the church if they accepted the message. Hunter writes that the Roman model, thus described, fits what has often been typical of the American evangelical model: “Presentation, Decision, Assimilation.”⁹ In contrast, the Celtic model first started with building community with people, allow them to see and experience the ministry of the

⁷ George G. Hunter, III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 26-27.

⁸ Hunter, *Celtic Way*, 28.

⁹ Hunter, *Celtic Way*, 53. Hunter builds on the work of John Finney, *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996).

church, and in time many will come to faith.¹⁰ The principle that merges from the Celtic approach is, “belonging comes before believing”. Therefore, evangelism becomes more about helping people to belong.¹¹

There are strengths and challenges to this approach. The strengths include that fact that it is at its core, relational. It authenticates the gospel based on our mutual need to be known and loved. It also allows for conversion to be more of a process than an event. I have at times been engaged in presenting the gospel to a person, along the Roman model, perhaps, and my presentation has been logical enough, and compelling enough that a person was willing to say a prayer of commitment without any coercion. I must admit, that I have often walked away wondering if a real work of the Spirit of God had taken place. It is not surprising that many such approaches require immediate follow-up based on assurance, assurance that something has really happened. I have been far more convinced that a meaningful work of conversion has transpired, or is transpiring when it happens in the context of a relationship.

Another strength of a ‘belonging’ approach is that it requires us to truly love people the way that Jesus loved us, accepting them the way they are, building a relationship on grace. Timothy Keller introduces a challenging insight when he says that to truly love them we need to have a reciprocal relationship. Describing some of the lessons from planting a church in New York City, Keller writes:

Early on we discovered that it was not enough for Christians to feel pity, or even just compassion for the city. Staff and leaders had to humbly

¹⁰ Hunter, *Celtic Way*, 53.

¹¹ Hunter, *Celtic Way*, 55.

learn from and respect New York City and its people. Our relationship with the secular, driven, bright, restless people of Manhattan had to be a consciously reciprocal one. We had to see God's "common grace" in them. We had to learn that we needed them to fill out our own understanding of God and his grace, just as they needed us for the same. We had to be energized and enriched by the city, not just drained by it. Even Jesus so united his heart with the people he ministered to that he "needed" their friendship, (Matthew 26:36-41).¹²

When evangelism happens because people have been welcomed and included in the life of a church, follow-up after conversion is easier, in not even unnecessary. Often, after a presentation-decision conversion has happened, and the assurances have been explained, then the person is encouraged to get connected to a church or small group, begin reading the Bible, and learning how to pray. When a person comes to faith in the context of already being engaged in those activities they are in a better position already. When those very things inspired commitment, they have already become an essential part of a person's life.

The challenge with welcoming people who are not sure about God, Jesus, or any Christian claims informally into the life of the church community is that it might be confusing as to what it means to be a follower of Christ. Also, a person might easily attach to the loving and accepting experience of the church, but may not attach to Christ, and may not feel any urgency to do so. I recently met with a couple who have been coming to our church with their family. They appreciate the experience they are having and want to be part of the church. When we recently established our first membership, the husband signed the Membership Covenant, with some qualification. In an email he let me know

¹² Timothy Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Redeemer Church Planting Center: Church Planter Manual* (New York: Redeemer, 2002), 257.

that they did not believe that Jesus was the son of God or that he had had to die for our sins. He and his wife wanted to know if it was okay to be members without a specific commitment to Christ. When I met with them I explained that the membership process is meant to recognize our beliefs and experience with Christ, that the biblical view of membership is of a dynamic union first with Jesus and then with the church. They were not pressing to become members, more interested in having the conversation and explaining where they are. They did not seem to feel misled, as if we had loved them into the church without showing them the fine print. The membership process had actually been clarifying to them. I was able to affirm their own description of being on a journey and express my joy that they were coming. We are in a relationship together that is giving them the space to explore the life of Christ.

Jim Belcher describes churches that expect belief to come before belonging as “bounded-set” churches, built on foundation truths of the faith. To these more traditional churches, it is clear that one cannot belong without believing. Churches that focus mostly on belonging first he describes as “relational-set” churches. His discussion is framed in the context of conflict with traditional churches and emergent churches.¹³ Using the imagery of a well, he describes a “centered-set” approach where Christ is the well, and as he draws people to the well there are levels of experience. In the ministry of Jesus there were groups of people who he welcomed, yet, he did call them to discipleship. “Belonging is important. Jesus invited many into his community.

¹³ Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP), 86-87.

That is what got him into trouble with the Pharisees (the original bounded-set people?). But at the same time he did not shy from the truth of the gospel and the need for his followers to repent of their idols . . . Yes, belonging is important, but we still have to believe at some point. He calls those in the outer circle to come into the inner circle, to be close to the Well.”¹⁴

The absence of vital relationships with those in the outer circle of the well nearly always prevents evangelism from being a project that never gets done, never engages people, and never sees the life-transformation that Jesus produces in “lost” people. If lost people are welcomed into the community of the church, John Burke warns that things will get messy. People will arrive with problems and habits that threaten the decorum of most churches. They will not arrive with a Christian consensus. Explaining the challenge at his own church, Gateway Community, which had many seekers in the rough, Burke writes, “Many churched Christians who came through the doors of Gateway in the early days just could not handle the discomfort of having so many seekers around them. They would hang out in the lobby after the service, strike up a conversation, and slowly realize that the person they were talking to held none of their ‘sacred beliefs’ regarding abortion, sex before marriage, evolution, or other hot-topics of Christian subculture. After a conversation like that they usually scared each other off.”¹⁵ Burke makes the point that we are living in a modern day “Corinth,” and should expect to have to wrestle with non-traditional issues in the church. Grace Baptist Church, in Hudson, had plenty

¹⁴ Belcher, *Deep Church*, 101.

¹⁵ John Burke, *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come As You Are Culture in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 18.

of seekers in the rough. Every Labor Day weekend we rented a Boy Scout camp near town and spent the time together mostly having fun, with a worship and baptism service on Sunday morning. Each year we would have some people come who were new to the church, dedicated Christians who had moved into the area over the summer. I always tried to speak to them privately before the weekend got going, to prepare them for the people they would have a chance to “enjoy” at the meals, sitting with them in the dining hall. I remember one mature Christian who had been a key leader at his church before he had moved to our area making the comment, “I realize that I have mostly done my theology in a test tube, in church where I did not encounter people like I meet here.”

The reality is that a church does not get to truly practice grace unless it radically engages others outside itself. Brennan Manning criticizes the typical church: “Put bluntly: the American Church today accepts grace in theory but denies it in practice.”¹⁶ A woman who was our town animal control officer started coming to our church. She later told me that she was hesitant to come, sure that she was not “good enough” to come. On arriving for her first visit, she saw many people she knew, and concluded that if they were there, she was certainly good enough. Most likely she had written some up for animal violations. Others who might be involved in Alcoholics Anonymous would visit and observe that they saw many people from “the program.” Grace abounded. It had to. Transformation also abounded, in both the direction of the

¹⁶ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 18.

dedicated Christian who could easily become an “older brother,” and in the prodigal who was loved and accepted.

A key result of radically engaging people by welcoming them is that we become engaged as they become the most effective evangelists in the church. They do not know better. They are still vitally connected to their family and friends who are usually not connected to a church. The ones getting involved begin to bring others. Whereas, most of the mature believers have long since lost any meaningful social network of people outside church, the newest people are still connected. The worship leader of my current church is an area musician who has his own studio and is involved in several local bands, none of them Christian bands. He has played music in churches before, but he is not a typical worship leader. His primary world has been the independent music scene, and with his long hair and beard he looks the role. He regularly uses members of area bands to assist him in worship. One of them has become the weekly drummer, and it has been remarkable to watch the way the church has received him, accepted him and loved him. Our worship leader enjoys telling us how much the drummer is ‘evangelizing’ other area musicians about what he is learning at church. For Advent, these musicians produced an album of Christian hymns and had CD release party, calling it “Hymn Sing.” The local independent newspaper that is the cultural pulse of our area reviewed the album, and the review began by saying that readers might not recognize the name of the church, but would certainly recognize the names of the musicians. Only these musicians could be reaching other musicians, but none of that would happen if they did not have a place where they felt welcomed.

The most recent training material on evangelism produced by Willow Creek reflects a radical engagement with people that respects process. Bill Hybels describes the lifestyle of a believer who wants to engage others as “Living 3D:” Develop friendships. Discover stories. Discern next steps.¹⁷

Friendship and relational evangelism have been around as emphases for some time, but there is something new and different about Hybels’ approach. All friendship evangelism begins with making friends, but usually for the opportunity to make a gospel presentation and invite a response. The second step in Living 3D is not a presentation, but a discovery, taking the time to know someone else’s story. Jonathan Acuff says that we are sometimes inclined to take short-cuts in sharing our faith, as if we can “friend suggest” Jesus like one would do on Facebook.

The truth is that sometimes I drop Jesus into someone’s lap like I’m sending a random friend suggestion on Facebook. I don’t really tell them much about him. I don’t really invest in the life of the person I’m talking to. I don’t even really listen to their story. I just rush to the end of my agenda and essentially say, “Yeah, yeah, regardless of what’s going on with you and your whole situation, I’d like to send you this friend suggestion to connect with Jesus.”

I’ve started to ask people questions I genuinely want answers to. Instead of asking a question and then forcing the conversation back into my framework regardless of their answer, I’ve tried to just listen and let people talk and remain engaged in what they have to say. The more I’ve done that, the more I’ve been amazed at how willing people are to open up when you actually listen.¹⁸

What Hybels and Acuff say should be done on an individual level should be applied to the corporate experience with people. When people have spiritual

¹⁷ Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room: Small Steps Pointing People to Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 60.

¹⁸ Jonathan Acuff, *Stuff Christians Like* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 189.

space in a church to come as they are and explore who Christ is, then the church will begin to live in 3D.

SUMMARY

Perhaps the best picture of a church that is radically engaged with those who seem far from God is the picture of the Father's homecoming banquet described by Jesus in Luke 15. First of all, when we realize that the eschatological outcome from Jesus' point of view is a banquet, a feast, we become more hopeful and hospitable instantly. Then, when we realize the Father's joy over the prodigal's return we should be even more dedicated to those who would assume that they have disqualified themselves from the banquet. It is easy to imagine that the story would have had a tragic outcome if the younger brother had encountered his older brother first. He would not have made it home. A church can be truly present to God when it shares the Father's joy of the prodigal's return.

CHAPTER 9:

CONCLUSION

There are several movements at work in the church. Each represents opportunities and challenges. Each represents a critique of current state. The emergent movement, with its determination to exegete postmodernity brings a challenge to the church. It holds up a cultural mirror, confronting the impact of modernity upon the church. It exposes blind spots, but it must realize that it will generate its own blind spots. Efforts to deconstruct the Post-Reformation church for the sake of being missional will be mixed with risks of losing our way. It is worth the risk and actually inevitable. The emergent church is searching for integrity, even more than for missional impact.

Simultaneously, there is a movement for spiritual authenticity, not just in the church. In the church, however, a renewed effort to pursue spiritual formation finds its best opportunity, as usual, in the person of Christ. Again, there is a challenge to remove lenses that may be distorted by tradition, church culture, national politics, or any other shaping influences.

Spiritual formation will be different than before, or rather the spiritual outcomes will be. Compassion and justice will once again be objects of the spiritual life. Disengagement from the “powers and principalities” will challenge the status quo of many former alliances and structures. Perhaps, there will even be a suspicion of many former trusted places of authority. On the other hand, there may be a return to some places that represent security and certainty.

The missional movement is forcing the church to look outward, to ask challenging questions about the church's relevance, or make judgments on its lack of relevance. We want church to matter. We want God to matter.

Winds are blowing. They may launch ships or cause storms. What kinds of leaders will emerge? What kinds of leaders are emerging? The research of this thesis indicates that the following needs to happen:

1. Leaders need to emerge who are deeply rooted in a biblical experience with God. What is meant by biblical is that it is most like how leaders in the Bible experienced God. Through his calling, they were first and foremost present to God. Leaders need to be trained by Christ and empowered by the Spirit. Spiritual integrity must be the highest calling. This calling is not experienced or fulfilled in private or isolation. Leaders must be vitally connected to others, as were the New Testament leaders. In a changing world, leaders must embrace the challenges of not always knowing the course, but always relying on the One leading the way.
2. Whatever forms, structures, or styles that our churches take, churches must be rooted in a deep and authentic worship experience of God. Spiritual formation, service and mission must come from being present to God, together. Leaders should aspire to lead others in a life-transforming, building-up experience with God. God must be unavoidable when we gather.
3. The life and presence of Jesus must be evident among us. Growing in our understanding and real-life experience with Jesus is what will help us experience these changing times as "new wine." We can pursue all of life under his leadership.
4. When we pursue Christ we will follow him into the lives of others. We need to be prepared to go where he goes, especially when it violates what we imagine of church. We must be desperate to see others "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalms 34:8).
5. We must expect to attach to the suffering of others in a more incarnational way. Most of us will not know how to do this. Our efforts will be clumsy, and will struggle to rise above charity. The next generation will have to lead us.
6. We must accept not always knowing what to do in all of these areas. We should use our best gifts and energies to serve God and others, but

we do not have all that we need in ourselves. We do not know all that we need to know. We will have to learn. The humility that results will serve the cause of Christ and the welfare of others.

7. What needs to happen in our lives, ministries, churches and communities can only happen by the power of God's Spirit. We must strive to live and serve by the Spirit's power. There is great blessing in needing God to be God at this time, in this place.

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Education

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Master of Divinity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts, *Summa Cum Laude*, 1985.

Doctor of Ministry, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina.
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Experience

1975-82	InterVarsity Staff, Duke University and North Carolina State University.
1984-85	Pastoral Intern, First Baptist Church, Sudbury, Massachusetts.
1985-87	Church Planter/Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, Hudson, Massachusetts, appointed by the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.
1987-2000	Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, Hudson, Massachusetts.
2000-08	Pastor of Teaching, Outreach and Vision, Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
2009-Current	Church Planter/Pastor, The Gathering Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Family

Married to Libby L. Acuff, 5/25/74.

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